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# Summary

This book explores how farmer suicide changed over time and across regions in China and tries to overcome the limitations of classical theories on suicide in respect of the structure–action dichotomy.

Based on traditional Chinese and Western notions of suicide, the book comes up with a “structure–action” theoretical framework to help readers understand differences in farmer suicides, in both temporal and spatial dimensions.

According to the degree of kinship bonds and the degree of regulatory control, this study makes distinctions between three types of society: tight-knit, loose-knit, and individualistic. It classifies suicide into four ideal types, namely egoistic suicide, altruistic suicide, vengeful suicide, and suicide of despair, according to the motive behind such an act, and on this basis, it further proposes 12 empirical types: egoistic suicide to evade, to end suffering, and to vent anger; altruistic suicide for honor, responsibility, and relief of burden; vengeful suicide as a punishment, threat, and defense against slander; suicide of despair over value, marriage and relationship problems, and survival problems.

The book finds that death caused by suicide is quite noticeable among young people—especially young females—in a tight-knit society, while higher rates of suicides are reported among the middle-aged and older persons in both a loose-knit society and an individualistic society. In terms of the ideal types of suicide, a tight-knit society has a highly significant rate of vengeful suicide, followed by altruistic suicide, and the main empirical types are vengeful suicide as a punishment and as a threat. In a loose-knit society, suicides are rather discretely distributed across the ideal types and the empirical types, and those out of egoistic causes to evade have a relatively higher frequency of occurrence. An

individualistic society has the highest rates of egoistic suicide and suicide of despair, with egoistic suicide to end suffering and suicide of despair over survival problems being the two striking empirical types.

This book concludes that suicide is not determined by social structure or suicidal action alone, but rather a product of the interplay between the two.

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# 1. Introduction

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This book explores how farmer suicide changed over time and across region in China and tries to overcome the limitations of classic theories on suicide in respect of the structure-action dichotomy.

Beginning in 1987, China provided the World Health Organization (WHO) with data on Chinese suicide deaths, on the basis of a sample size of about 100 million people. Of the 39 countries that submitted suicide data to the WHO, China had the fourth highest rate of suicide (Phillips et al. 1999; Xie 1999: 210).

According to Global Burden of Disease and Injury Series reports published by the World Bank, the WHO, and Harvard University, in 1990, China had a suicide rate of 30.3 per 100,000 persons, and that for Chinese women was 33.5 per 100,000 persons (Phillips et al. 1999; Xie 1999: 211). In 1999, using data gathered in five years from 1990 to 1994 (on the basis of a population of 10 million) from the Chinese Academy of Preventive Medicine's disease monitoring points across China, Phillips et al. estimated China's suicide rate at 28.7 per 100,000 persons (Phillips et al. 1999; Xie 1999:212).

In 2002, Phillips (2002: 4–5) made estimates once again based on 1995–1999 data from the Chinese Ministry of Health's death registration system, and found that China had a suicide rate of 23 per 100,000 persons and about 287,000 Chinese people took their own lives a year. He published his findings on the world's best-known medical journal *The Lancet*. By the WHO standards, a suicide rate above 20 per 100,000 persons in any country is counted as high, so Phillips' findings attracted unprecedented attention to the issue of suicide in China.

In China, an obvious gap in suicide exists between urban and rural areas, and, contrary to what is typically found around the world, suicide is much more likely to happen in China's rural areas than in urban areas. According to estimates by Phillips (2004: 277), the rural population has a suicide rate three times higher than the urban population, with over 90% of deaths from suicide taking place in rural areas. Therefore, if people understand suicide in the rural population, they can fathom at least 90% of suicides in China.

The background information above roughly suggests the following:

First, suicides are a very serious problem in China which has been among the countries with a high rate of suicide ever since its suicide data were published, especially during the 1990s;
Second, there is a massive urban–rural gap in suicides in China, and suicides in rural China must first be understood to present a full picture of suicides in the country.

With this in mind, the book is focused on farmer suicides that account for nearly 90% of all deaths from suicide in China.

Prior to this study, Prof. Wu Fei of Peking University, under the influence of U.S. Prominent scholar Jack. D. Douglas, conducted extraordinary research into suicide among northern Chinese farmers. Wu compared the relationships in Western philosophy between

God and man and, inspired by the Western notions of life, searched for a “thing” that could be the equivalent to “God” in the West. The phrase he found that refers to this “thing” is *guo rizi* (meaning living one’s life), and he used an analysis framework centered on “*guo rizi*” to fathom suicide phenomena in China (Wu 2007a, b, 2009).

In Wu’s (2007b: 71) eyes, “*guo rizi*” is what the Chinese people use to describe the entire process of life from birth to death. At the heart of this process are families, around which people deal with relations between persons, property, the proprieties and other central elements. Family, on the other hand, is an entity that combines emotion and politics. From an emotional standpoint, a family is built on the basis of close ties between its members and ends with the disintegration of such ties. Politically speaking, inside a family is a series of power games. Therefore, when dealing with relations between persons, property and the proprieties, people may come across emotional upheaval, feeling wronged or rejected; or they may suffer from setbacks in terms of power, experiencing injustice inside the family. These two types of failure and the mishandling of tension therefrom are tantamount to the failure in *guo rizi*, which often leads to suicide. In other words, the failure to properly deal with interpersonal relations and other problems in life gives rise to suicide (Wu 2007a, b, 2009).

Given the dominance of epidemiology or psychoanalysis in suicide research in China, Wu’s study is of great importance to suicide research in the areas of social sciences and humanities. His research, however, is not without flaws. To sum up, its limitations are mainly in the following two aspects.

First, Wu’s research deals with suicide phenomena at specific points in time rather than an extended period of time. Thus, one cannot see, from his research findings, a trajectory of change in logic behind suicides in China over the past 30 years.

Second, Wu’s research is geographically focused rather than cover the whole country. The occurrences of suicides in Mengzhou, a northern county where Wu did his study, have distinctive characteristics of northern Chinese rural regions, similar to those I have surveyed in rural Shanxi, Shandong, Hebei, Henan and other provinces, but hugely different from those in rural regions of southern and central China. Therefore, an analysis of suicides in one county alone cannot present a full picture of suicides across the country.

Wu’s pioneering social science study of suicide has directed more attention to research in this area, and the problems with his analytical thinking also provide huge room for later researchers. This book tries to explore the differences in suicides among Chinese farmers over time and across regions as well as the underlying mechanisms, and in the meantime to make methodological breakthroughs.

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# 1 Classical Theories

Émile Durkheim uses the suicide rate as an important metric in his analysis. He draws a clear demarcation between suicide research and psychology, and tries to demonstrate that it is sociology, rather than psychology, that is predominant in interpretation of suicide.

Durkheim (1996: 11) defines suicide as “applied to any case of death from a positive or negative act, carried out by the victim himself, which he was aware would produce this result.” “An attempted suicide is the act so defined, halted before death has occurred.” Durkheim thinks that the biggest feature of suicides is that the victims knew why they would commit suicide and what it would mean to them. Durkheim obviously wants to avoid sliding towards a psychological and psychiatric approach that he is critical of. In his definition of suicide, therefore, he simply stresses the cause but ignores the purpose or intent. This is because, in his eyes, it is impossible to know about what led to the decision to commit suicide, and even if the victim made the decision, it is also impossible for the researcher or observer to make sense of the exact intent or purpose of this decision. Durkheim believes that intention is something very covert, which others can but estimate roughly and cannot accurately discern or figure out. In Durkheim’s view, even the victim himself did not know the true purpose or intention of his or her act. Durkheim further questions the use of

intention or motive to explain the act of suicide, arguing that many similar acts may serve wholly different purposes without changing their nature (Durkheim 1996: 10).

In my eyes, however, Durkheim's definition of suicide is still ambiguous. In particular, intrinsic tension exists between his individualist definition and later analysis in a holistic approach. Durkheim chooses to conduct his study by analyzing, not the act of suicide, but suicide rates which represent an objective and integrated social fact. In his eyes, suicide rates are not a simple combination of isolated events of suicide, but a new integrated whole made up by particular events, a new, particular and unitary social fact whose particularity is just its social nature (Durkheim 1996: 14). On this basis, he proceeds to explore social reasons of differing suicide rates. With his sharp and critical thinking he excludes mental disorders (such as mania, depression, compulsion, impulse, and imitation), biological factors (such as ethnicity and heredity), and natural factors (such as climate, and temperature). It is presumably not very hard to have excluded these non-social factors since many researchers before Durkheim, for example Tade and Esquero, had intensively discussed these problems. Therefore, Durkheim only needs to extract those previously recognized non-social factors and elaborate them one by one.

But how can we determine social factors influencing suicide rates? Now comes the dilemma, very obviously for Durkheim, between defining suicide in an individualist approach and deliberating on suicide rates from a holistic perspective. This is because, if suicide types need to be empirically determined, problems in defining single suicide events will inevitably arise, and by his definition, Durkheim is unable to exclude suicides beyond his knowledge. Moreover, he lacks empirical evidences to support his research, and, apart from some statistics, individual suicide cases are few in his research. Therefore, he admits:

> Unfortunately, it is impossible to classify suicide among the sane according to its morphological characteristics or types, because the necessary documentation is almost entirely nonexistent. In order to attempt this, one would need to have good descriptions of a large number of individual cases. We should have to know about the state of mind of the suicides at the moment when they resolved on the act, how they prepared to carry it out, how they eventually did accomplish it, whether they were agitated or depressed, calm or exultant, anxious or irritated, and so on. But we have hardly any information of this kind except in the case of suicide among the insane, and it is precisely because of the observations and descriptions made by alienists that we are able to define the main types of suicide in which madness is the determining cause. For the rest, we are more or less entirely without any information. (Durkheim 1996: 136)

Therefore, Durkheim does not take a morphological approach to suicide (rate) classification; instead he adopts an etiological approach—make a few assumptions about social factors, validate the assumptions, and then determine suicide types. In his eyes, it is nothing more than a reversal of the order of the research:

> However, we can reach our goal from another direction, simply by reversing the order of our research. There can only be as many different types of suicide as there are differences in the causes from which they derive. For each one to have a nature peculiar to it, it must also have its own conditions of existence. One antecedent or a single group of antecedents cannot produce one result at one time, and at other times another, because in that case the difference distinguishing the second from the first would be without a cause and that in turn would negate the principle of causality. Every specific distinction that we note between causes therefore implies a similar distinction between effects. Hence we can draw up a list of social types of suicide, not classifying them directly according to characteristics that we have previously described, but by classifying the causes that produce them. Without concerning ourselves with knowing why they are differentiated from one another, we shall look

> directly for the social conditions on which they depend, and then group these conditions, according to their similarities and differences, in a certain number of separate classes. (Durkheim 1996: 137)

This is, however, where the problem lies. By so doing, the researcher is suspected of having been strongly biased. Furthermore, while he admits "this method has the drawback of postulating a diversity of types without touching on them directly" he does not view it as problematic (Durkheim 1996: 137). This paradox is, in essence, still an incompatibility between the individualistic definition and the holistic research. In other words, Durkheim fails to commensurately deal with the individual and the whole. Limitations in research materials are also significant, a point mentioned once and again in Durkheim's exposition. Things perhaps would be different if Durkheim had not just heaps of statistical data but also an abundance of records on suicide cases. It is just the above-described paradox that causes many a problems with his suicide classification research. For instance, he focuses much of his research on only three suicide types: egoistic suicide, altruistic suicide, and anomic suicide.

As I see it, it is not that Durkheim did not want to extend his study to other types of suicide, but that he was unable to explain them as an analysis of the other types, especially the mixed type, would require empirical evidences that were hardly available to him at his time. More importantly, as such an analysis would entail the use of empirical material and individual cases, he would be certain to fall into the trap of the individualist approach he disapproved of. That would be in contradiction to the holistic approach he used to analyze suicide rates. What buttresses his research on suicide rates is statistical material, and by so doing, he actually goes so far as to put the individual in opposition to the whole, statistics in opposition to empirical evidence. Thus his seemingly scientific and positivist approach has the danger of overemphasizing suicide of statistical significance. Our suicide research, however, is not intended to validate the sociological methodology like Durkheim did, but to explore real-world suicide cases and show concern for human life.

The sociological tradition that Durkheim initiated no doubt set a brilliant example in suicide research, and he also did well in validating the positivist sociological approach. But, when it comes to the specific area of research, the limitations of Durkheimism had long been a subject of rebuttal or criticism.

Later on, there were continued discussions on whether the Durkheim approach was appropriate. The focus of attention was placed on whether suicide rates could be used as the sole subject for suicide research, and how to understand and advance the research. Some Western scholars began thinking about these questions in the light of humanistic sociological tradition that Max Weber had established. The most notable of them was Jack D. Douglas, who focused, above all, on whether suicide rates could be used to explain suicide mechanisms, mainly questioning whether suicide data that Durkheim and other positivists had collected from official sources was reliable. Douglas dismisses actual rates of suicide as but an illusion because official tallies on suicide have deviations for various reasons and their use in research on suicide mechanisms leads to almost void results (Douglas 1967). He points out, on these grounds, that the researcher must pay attention to every specific suicidal action and come to an explanatory understanding of its circumstances, and that it is therefore better, rather than using suicide rates as the sole object of investigation, to conduct in-depth interviews with persons related to suicide victims, collect data on their suicidal actions and figure out exactly what social meanings their suicide has (Douglas 1967). Some positivist scholars seem to care little about Douglas' doubt over the authenticity of suicide rate data sources and his call for understanding the social meanings of suicide. They argue that they have already known the limitations of official tallies as Douglas had pointed out, but do not deem these an obstacle to their suicide research on the basis of suicide rates; and rather than use Douglas' theory as an antithesis, they simple ignore it in their research (Steve 1982: 62–63).

Douglas' approach is quite revealing for our research into suicide in rural China. Our research conditions are, in a sense, just the opposite of those that Durkheim then had, and similar to what Douglas asked for. First, we still lack a big sample, especially an accurate, standard and integrated nationwide tally of suicides. Second, in a long period after 1949, suicide remained a taboo in socialist countries including China, and was generally believed to be a phenomenon that should not and also did not exist in our society. This made it all the more difficult to obtain suicide rate numbers for this period (Da 2001). Third, given the existing conditions, what we can do is to obtain, by means of field research, all suicide cases in individual villages in the past 30 years and even a longer period. Certainly, Douglas' approach is not without flaws. Contrary to Durkheim, Douglas' strength is also his weakness. When people overemphasize the individualist approach but neglect the holistic analysis, it is difficult for them to look into the change of suicide over time—which also explains the merit of Durkheim's focus on suicide rate in his analysis.

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# 2 Research Methodology

Our methodological choice is based on the conditions under which we conduct our research.

If a suicide study is to begin with field research in China, a preferred path is certainly elucidating the social and cultural meanings of suicide from the perspective of humanistic sociology. However, due to the huge size of the country such meanings will vary considerably over time and from place to place, and the fast transformation of Chinese society will also add to their uncertainty. Thus it seems inappropriate to examine purely the social and cultural meanings of suicide.

Conversely, if we take positivism as a point of departure, there is indeed a lack of substantial and valid statistical data, and even for "official data" about which humanistic scholars are doubtful, there are great difficulties.

First, China began to release official data on suicide in 1987 and data for prior years is hardly available. Data for the 1980s is far from enough apart from the last few years of the period, and data for the 30 years from the founding of the People's Republic of China to 1980 is even more difficult to come by.

Second, data released after 1987 is not without problems; for example, unavailability of data for some years, and the absence in some time frames of the important variant of "age group" (Jing et al. 2010).

Third, existing official data also has quite a big flaw of underreporting, which even affects in large part our judgment of suicide situations. According to some studies, the national disease monitoring points had an underreporting rate of approximately 22.46% in 1996–1998, and a review of data on deaths from injuries and mental disorders in the years from August 1995 to August 2000 showed that the actual number of deaths from suicide in 1998 to 1999 was underreported by about 28.13% (Wang et al. 2003: 889–392), comparing to a 18% underreporting rate for data from the Ministry of Health's death registration system (Fei 2004: 277). Therefore, this data might suffice to only estimate suicide rates by which to get a basic picture of suicide in China, but admits of almost no possibility of conducting a systematic empirical research like Durkheim did.

It thus seems that the above two paths are both unfeasible from a practical standpoint. As a matter of fact, we may overcome to a certain extent difficulties confronting the above two paths so long as we create research conditions. Specifically, we may conduct field research like what sociologists have done, and through qualitative interviews preferably at village level, collect data on suicides over the past 30 years or longer. By so doing, we could gather not just empirical material which Durkheim wanted but failed to obtain, but also data of small samples for quantitative analysis. This book follows such an integrated path, paying attention to local cultural knowledge associated with the suicidal action of each victim as humanists stress, and in the meantime collecting suicide data of a large sample over a long period and a wide area as positivists expect with a view to examining how suicides vary in time and space. In this sense, the book tries to reverse what Durkheim (1996: 137)

describes as “a reverse of the order.” From the humanistic perspective, it intends to facilitate suicide classification based on practical empirical material from a morphological rather than an etiological perspective and better elucidate the structural and cultural mechanisms of suicide. From the positivist perspective, the book looks at suicide rates to shed light on difference in time and space. In this way, the methodology is appropriate for research conditions.

There are two crucial variables used in the analysis: suicide rates, and the act of suicide. In this book, a suicide rate refers to the incidence of deaths from suicide, or the ratio between deaths from suicide and a given population which is typically 100,000 according to academic tradition. Depending on the data collected, there are crude suicide rates and standardized suicide rates: a crude suicide rate means a suicide rate estimated for a particular period based on the existing population; a standardized suicide rate is the number of suicidal deaths in the standard population, which is adjusted for the age structure. Unless otherwise noted, suicide rates used below refer to the annual average of approximate crude suicide rates and standardized suicide rates; similarly, population data collected is based on the registered populations for survey sites in 2009, adjusted for gender and age according to data from the 5th national census. As to the act of suicide, what we do is to elucidate the true intention or purpose of the act, namely their social meanings.

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# 3 Theoretical Framework

## 3.1 Traditional Chinese and Western Notions of Suicide

From the late Spring and Autumn Period to the end of the Warring States Period (sixth century BCE–third century CE), traditional Chinese culture and thought entered what Karl Jaspers (1988: 68–70) called the “Axial Age.” In the eyes of Mr. Feng (2000: 49), while Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, among others in the Axial Age, and the philosophical schools they established, could be seen as the Western philosophical orthodoxy, China’s Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi, and other philosophers, and the philosophical schools they founded, could be regarded the orthodoxy of Chinese philosophy. Therefore, a contrast of their notions of suicide may present a succinct yet clear picture of the thinking on the subject in the Axial Age.

### *3.1.1 Western Notions of Suicide in the Axial Age*

How western civilization perceives the questions of life, death, and in particular the ways of living and dying can best be described by Hamlet’s famous soliloquy. Given the cultural origin, “to be or not to be” is more like a question of dichotomy. Perhaps what makes the choice difficult is not life or death in the literal sense, but the “thing” it points to is more about a debate on “rights” and “punishment for sin” (Li 2007).

In ancient Greece, there were plentiful of examples of prominent personalities including philosophers, committing suicide. It is perhaps their death that made suicide an important subject of philosophical discussions. Socrates is supposedly opposed to suicide; he believes that men are a chattel of the gods and that suicide is an escape from and sacrilege to the gods and obviously should be prohibited. Socrates says:

> …but perhaps there is some reason in it [prohibition of suicide]… that we men are in a kind of prison and must not set ourselves free or run away, seems to me to be weighty and not easy to understand. But this at least, Cebes, I do believe is sound, that the gods are our guardians and that we men are one of the chattels of the gods. Do you not believe this?
>
> “Yes,” said Cebes, “I do.”
>
> “Well then,” said he (Socrates), “if one of your chattels should kill itself when you had not indicated that you wished it to die, would you be angry with it and punish it if you could?”
>
> “Certainly,” he replied.

> Then perhaps from this point of view it is not unreasonable to say that a man must not kill himself until god sends some necessity upon him, such as has now come upon me." (Quoted from Wu 2007b: 18–19; also see: Plato 2012, 11–13)

Socrates's view indicates that he believes that men have no right to choose to commit suicide and that it is the gods, not man, that have the right to decide how a man dies. Socrates also hints that a man committing suicide without being instructed by gods should be punished. Plato basically follows his teacher Socrates' anti-suicide stance. He even goes further by saying:

> As for men who kill their most intimate and supposedly most loved of all men, how should they be punished? I'm speaking of men who kill themselves. They forcibly take away what they themselves deserve, not as arranged by city-state laws, nor because of unbearable pain, of inescapable misfortune befalling them, of shame making them unable to live on, but because of laziness, unmanliness, cowardice, – they are unjustly punishing themselves. In such situations, the gods know how other laws cleanse and bury them, and the prominent ones of their relatives would ponder and question related laws to know about how to deal with the matter: first, the grave for a man who so dies should be all alone, without other graves around; second, he should be buried in a nameless spot between those twenty [the writer's note: "twenty" is supposedly a typo on the translator's part; it should be "twelve".] eye-catching places that we have noticed, no mound raised and trees planted over the grave, no name inscribed for it. (Quoted from Wu, 2007b: 41; also see: Plato, 2003: 635)

Plato, though harsher in his opposition to suicide than this teacher Socrates, still gives leeway for suicide in some particular circumstances. By comparison, his student Aristotle is opposed to suicide more harshly, opining that no exceptions or room should be made for anyone committing suicide. He says:

> A type of just things is all things that comply with moral virtues as required by law. For instance, law does not permit men to kill themselves; any things that law does not decree are forbidden. Whenever a man breaks law by harming another intentionally (knowing the victim and knowing also how to harm the victim) rather than harming himself, he is doing an injustice. A man killing himself is doing it intentionally, going against what is right; it is not permitted by law, and so it is an injustice done. But to whom it is an injustice done? To the city-state, not himself. Because he suffers it intentionally, and what is done intentionally does not justify suffering an injustice. But the city-state suffers harm and so punishes the suicide for the disgrace because they have done an injustice to the city-state. (Quoted from Wu 2007b: 44–45; also see: Aristotle 2003: 162)

To sum up, the question underlying Socrates' and Aristotle's discussions about suicide is whether the victims, or individuals in the broader sense, have the "right" to dispose of their physical body, and both philosophers discuss this philosophical issue from a legal standpoint and, with their anti-suicide stance, argue for insulting punishment by law of the bodies of those who have committed suicide. Influenced by this, the law of ancient Athens treated suicide as a kind of murder on the grounds that it was a crime of taking away one's own life (Wu 2007b: 43; He 1997: 91; Minois 2003: 46). In our view, the most central logic behind the three ancient Greek philosophers' arguments about suicide is that they all approached the problem of suicide from the angle of "rights" and "righteousness" which is essentially a question of "justice" that is more abstract than is the individual. Such thinking has obviously been influential in Western suicidology in terms of theoretical positions or arguments. From Saint Augustine to Thomas Aquinas, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and on to contemporary times, Western philosophers, theologians, thinkers or other scholars all

approached the issue of suicide from the perspective of “rights” and expounded it in such binary oppositions as of the individual and society, the individual and state or nation, and human beings as individuals and God.

### *3.1.2 Confucian Notions of Suicide in the Axial Age*

In the Axial Age that lasted a few centuries in China, many took their own lives likewise. This is why we take pre-Qin Confucianism—the orthodoxy of Chinese philosophy—as the most important point of departure for our discussion. Unlike Socrates who clearly opposed suicide, Confucius’s attitude towards it was rather vague. Confucius did not directly discuss the issue of suicide as did Socrates, but we can perceive his attitude in his comments on individuals who killed themselves or those who failed to do so. His more direct remark about suicide is found in his *Analects: Duke Ling of Wey*:

> The determined scholar and the man of virtue will not seek to live at the expense of injuring their virtue. They will even sacrifice their lives to preserve their virtue complete. (Yang Bojun/Confucius 2006: 184)

“Virtue” is at the core of Confucianism represented by Confucius. In Confucius’s eyes, “life” is certainly important, but if “virtue” is injured because of “cravenly clinging to life”, then “life” is immoral and meaningless. Conversely, if “death” is a must for the sake of “virtue”, then suicide (“sacrificing one’s life”) is justifiable and meaningful.

Confucius’s comment on Boyi and Shuqi, both of whom committed suicide by starvation, is a further reflection of his attitude towards suicide. In his *Analects: Weizi*, Confucius says:

> Refusing to surrender their wills, or to submit to any taint in their persons – such, I think, were Bo Yi and Shu Qi. (Yang Bojun/Confucius 2006: 221)

Confucius praises Boyi’s and Shuqi’s suicide as virtuous and dignified. In the *Analects: Shu Er*, when Zi Gong asks Confucius what sort of men Bo Yi and Shu Qi were, Confucius says decidedly,

> “They were ancient worthies.” “Did they have any repinings because of their course?” The Master again replied, “They sought to act virtuously, and they did so; what was there for them to repine about?” (Yang Bojun/Confucius 2006: 79)

Confucius is convinced, above all, that Boyi and Shuqi were both worthies, and then, by placing himself in their position, judges that because what the two men sought was righteousness, and they did so by refusing the food of the Zhou and consequently starving to death, and that they had nothing to regret now that they got what they had sought for through their act of suicide. Such thinking is quite different from that of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Apparently, Confucius neither discusses suicide per se nor approaches individual cases; he talks about a more abstract issue, instead. This difference is clearly manifested in his seemingly paradoxical but actually consistent comments on men who “were supposed to commit suicide” for the sake of “virtue” but did not. *Analects: Xian Wen* records how Confucius replies to his disciples Zi Lu and Zi Gong who asked him about Guan Zhong.

> Zi Lu said, “The duke Huan caused his brother Jiu to be killed, when Shao Hu died with his master, but Guan Zhong did not die. May not I say that he was wanting in virtue?”.
>
> The Master said, “The Duke Huan assembled all the princes together, and that not with weapons of war and chariots – it was all through the influence of Guan Zhong. Whose beneficence was like his? Whose beneficence was like his?” (Yang Bojun/Confucius 2006: 170)

Judging by Confucius' previous instruction that "The determined scholar and the man of virtue will not seek to live at the expense of injuring their virtue. They will even sacrifice their lives to preserve their virtue complete", Zi Lu dismissed Guan Zhong as wanting in virtue. But Confucius argued that Duke Huan of Qi convened multiple meetings to form an alliance between vassal states, and eventually ended war and brought about peace, which was good for all the common people, and that all that did credit to Guan Zhong, who thus certainly was not wanting in virtue. Confucius further explains to another disciple Zi Gong what he thinks of Guan Zhong in the *Analects: Xian Wen*.

> Zi Gong said, "Guan Zhong, I apprehend, was wanting in virtue. When the Duke Huan caused his brother Jiu to be killed, Guan Zhong was not able to die with him. Moreover, he became prime minister to Huan."
>
> The Master said, "Guan Zhong acted as prime minister to the duke Huan, made him leader of all the princes, and united and rectified the whole kingdom. Down to the present day, the people enjoy the gifts which he conferred But for Guan Zhong, we should now be wearing our hair unbound, and the lappets of our coats buttoning on the left side. Will you require from him the small fidelity of common men and common women, who would commit suicide in a stream or ditch, no one knowing anything about them?" (Yang Bojun/Confucius 2006: 170)

Confucius believes that Guan Zhong did the right thing by not killing himself as did Shao Hu, because in assisting Duke Huan, he brought peace to the state and thus benefited the people; and that, conversely, it would have been meaningless for him to hang himself beside a stream or ditch like ordinary people, with no one knowing anything about it.

We thus may say that Confucianism does not judge suicide by "rights". Whether individuals have the right to determine their own life or death is not the focus of Confucianism, which instead is concerned with what social meanings that suicide might have and whether people die a "virtuous" death. And it is important to note that Confucianism makes no connection between suicide and deities or God, which it sees as nothing more than "virtue" or "man". In the Axial Age, Western civilization was concerned more about the right to commit suicide, whereas Chinese civilization focused more on the meaning or consequence of suicide.

All in all, Confucianism is not unequivocally for or against suicide, and judges whether suicide is moral or obligatory based on its motive and consequence. If both the motive and consequence of the act of suicide accord with the highest "social meanings" of "virtue and righteousness", the act is praiseworthy and acceptable; otherwise it should be negated and criticized.[1] These contradictory comments on different suicide victims suggest that Confucianism is flexible and tolerant on the issue of suicide rather than taking an either-or attitude as in the West.

## 3.2 "Structure-Action" Theory and Suicide

Overall, unlike Western scholars in the Axial Age and even in the whole Western history of suicidology who were concerned more with the "right" and "crime and punishment" concerning suicide, Confucianism focuses instead on "motives" and "consequences" of the act of suicide, providing a philosophical basis for us to build a theory with Chinese characteristics. In everyday life, what people care about is the reason for committing suicide, and that when the act of suicide is completed, what social consequences would arise. This justifies the necessity for us, in building a localized suicide theory, to go back to the Chinese civilization of the Axial Age and search for proper philosophical foundations. Therefore, we need to retrace the way of thinking in Axial-Age Chinese philosophy about the issue of suicide and find out "social meanings" or "motive" of act of suicides, In this way we will understand the mechanisms of suicide in China.

As for Durkheim (1996), suicide is more subject to social factors and has much to do with social structures; that is why he approaches suicide types from the standpoint of the two

variables—social integration and moral regulation. Douglas (1967), by contrast, focuses more on individual experiences in his research on suicide, accentuating purposes and social meanings of suicide. In effect, as I have talked about in the preceding section, a discussion of determining social factors of suicide cannot totally be divorced from the experiences of individuals who committed suicide and what purposes they sought; similarly, when discussing the social meanings of each suicide, it is impossible for us not to look into social structures that underlie the existence of those social meanings. The theoretical traditions in these two respects are important academic resources we need to ponder and build a suicide theory as appropriate to Chinese reality. At the same time, how suicide is perceived and looked at in traditional Chinese cultural values and beliefs suggests that attention is paid to both the individual and the society. Therefore, given both China's own cultural tradition and the two theoretical and methodological traditions of Western sociology of suicide, and in view of an integrated research path, it is necessary for us to build a theoretical framework in which the individual (social action) and the society (social structure) interact to shape the patterns of suicide, a structure-action framework that helps explain the phenomena of suicide in rural China, the differences over time and place, and the mechanisms behind them.

### *3.2.1 Two Dimensions of Social Structure*

From the perspective of academic tradition, social structure has been understood roughly in two ways. One stresses relations, as manifested in Spencer's theory on society-as-organism, Durkheim's discussion of collective and other relations, Simmel's views on how society is possible, Tönnies's distinction between society and community, and Radcliffe-Brown's studies on systems of kinship (López and Scott 2007: 16–25). The other places emphasis on institutions or norms, which we can see clearly in Durkheim's discussions on collective characterization, emphasis that Parsons and his followers like Merton, Barber, Davis and Lévi-Strauss put on cultures, institutions among other things in their elaborations of structural functionalism, and attempts that Alexander, Luhmann and other neofunctionalists made at re-theorizing the importance of institutional structures (López and Scott 2007: 27–29). In his elaboration of a duality of structure, Giddens (1998), who attempts at an integrated reconstruction of structure and action, associates structures with rules and resources–two dimensions also reflective of relations and systems or rules. Based on these traditions, I think that social structure can be approached from two most important dimensions: "relations", which, in the narrow sense, means interpersonal social relations and the degrees of association between them; and "rules", a system of values and norms that regulate interpersonal relations. These two dimensions are both closely linked and independent.

To better reflect rural social reality and to look into the types of social structure relative to farmer suicide, this book introduces two dimensions, degree of kinship bonds and degree of regulatory control. The former means how closely knit are groups of people related directly or indirectly by blood, with families as the central unit of society, while the latter refers to how intensively local rules regulate and control social behaviors, especially unconventional ones, with a view of maintaining the social order.

### *3.2.2 Basic Types of Social Structure*

According to the degree (high, moderate or low) of kinship bonds and of regulatory control, we may distinguish three ideal types of rural social structure in China today.

The first type has a high degree of kinship bonds and of regulatory control; close to this ideal type are largely lineage or quasi-lineage societies in empirical reality. From the perspective of blood relationship, this type of rural society feature closely-knit communities or groups formed by four or five generations, and in some larger communities or groups members may even trace their descent to the same settlers one dozen or several dozen generations back. These members work closely together internally and take concerted action externally. From the perspective of regulatory control, this type of society often, out of the need to remain closely together, emphasizes ancestor worship around which emerge a

complete standard ritual system, as well as an array of local social rules that can regulate public opinions and mete out unofficial punishment on unconventional behaviors detrimental to a good social order. A high degree of kinship bonds and of regulatory control cause this type of society to be highly cohesive, and that is why we call it “tight-knit society”.[2]

The second type of society has a moderate degree of kinship bonds and of regulatory control; empirically, kinship societies or small-clan societies (He 2007) are close to this type of society. They typically have a weaker degree of kinship bonds than lineage or quasi-lineage societies, at the core of which are blood ties generally existing with two or three generations, In other words, they feature a community of families with the same grandfather, capable of cooperating internally and taking concerted action externally. In terms of regulatory control, this type of society is not as strong as lineage societies, its members having certain but not very much strong control over behaviors detrimental to the local social order. Owing to the moderateness of these two dimensions, this type of society is divided into numerous family communities mostly of three or two generations, and that is why we call such societies “loose-knit societies”.

The third type of society has a low degree of kinship bonds and of regulatory control, and empirically, atomic societies (He 2007) or societies with nuclear families (or individuals in extreme cases) as the basic unit (Liu 2009) are quite close to this type. This type of society has loose kinship bonds, and except nuclear families, has almost no family community formed through blood relations. Therefore, a society of this type has almost no ability to cooperate internally, let alone taking concerted action externally, its members being atom-like individuals. As for regulatory control, the rules system that previously sustained a good social order has largely collapsed in such a society, which is manifested in everyday life in a decline in filial piety, distortions in pursuit of wealth, and the appearance of what Yan (2006) describes as multitudes of unethical individuals. In societies of this type, apart from financial gains, people rarely pursue transcending values; they are destroyers of order per se and thus have no wishes of maintaining a good village order as in the two types of society described above. These societies we may call “individualisitc societies”.

### *3.2.3 Ideal Types of Act of Suicide*

Unlike Durkheim, I have detailed accounts of empirical cases of suicide which he was denied at his time. This allows me to classify suicide from a morphological perspective rather than an etiological perspective. These cases suggest, however, that the act of one to end his or her own life is above all a social action of the individual. On the selection of variables for classification, therefore, unlike Durkheim who emphasizes “causes”, I prefer classifying suicide from a “purpose” or “motive” standpoint, considering suicide as a specific type of social action. As a matter of fact, my survey of suicide cases tries to reveal why farmers committed suicide and the implications of suicide for both the victims and related individuals. Empirically, so far as the individual cases are concerned, the act of suicide committed by the victim is in effect a type of social action, though unconventional, in the humanistic context. Therefore, we may establish the ideal types of act of suicide on the basis of Confucian analysis on the merits and demerits of suicide. There are basically four types of motive: “egoistic”, “altruistic”, “self-hurting”, and “hurting others”. Based on our field research conducted in rural areas, we divide the types of act of suicide, to which these four types of purpose or motive are corresponding, into egoistic suicide, altruistic suicide, suicide of despair, and vengeful suicide.

Egoistic suicide is the act of killing oneself for a self-beneficial purpose. Some seriously ill patients, for instance, chose to end their own lives, though their families were kind, or at least not bad to them. They wanted to do so not because of objective circumstances, but to rid themselves of pain brought by the illness.

Altruistic suicide is the act of killing oneself for the benefit of others. An example is seriously ill patients who chose to commit suicide not because their illness was so serious as

to be unbearable, nor because their families were unkind to them. They did it for no other reason than reducing their families' economic burden.

Suicide of despair is the self-destructive act of killing oneself for the purpose purely detrimental to the victim. Some seriously ill patients suffered unbearable pain because of both their disease and the indifference and loathing of their families who deemed them encumbrances. That means there existed objective circumstances that warranted their choice of self-destruction. The utter despair eventually drove them to death.

Vengeful suicide refers to the act of killing oneself for the purpose of hurting others. Take seriously ill patients as examples as well. While the patients actively sought medical treatment, their families refused to cooperate for consideration of family burden. There existed objective circumstances that warranted their choice of self-destruction. They thus ended their own lives in retaliation.

### *3.2.4 Social Structure and Suicidal Acts*

#### *Structure and Suicide*

From the perspective of theoretical tradition, a tight-knit society defined in this book, which has both a high degree of kinship bonds and of regulatory control, is somewhat close to the social structure that Durkheim (1996) discussed in relation to altruistic suicide; an individualistic society with a low degree of kinship bonds and of regulatory control is close to the social structure connected with what he defined as egoistic suicide; and a loose-knit society with a moderate level of kinship bonds and of regulatory control is basically in between these two kinds of social structures. Regretfully, Durkheim did not thoroughly research into suicide in connection with the third social structure.

We think that the degree of kinship bonds mainly determines whether victims considered their choice of suicide to be altruistic or egoistic. As a matter of fact, in China where family is largely taken as the unit for production and life, if there is a high degree of kinship bonds, people are not likely to consider committing suicide, because with close relationship comes a strong sense of responsibility and individuals are more likely to consider the possible effects of suicide on other family members. Even when people choose to end their lives due to special personal considerations, they tend to do so out of an "altruistic" motive on grounds of strong blood ties. In this way, they would perform their responsibility for family members in a reverse manner. In such a society, therefore, altruistic suicide is more likely to occur, especially among old people who are more likely to consider and commit suicide from an altruistic standpoint. Conversely, if blood ties are weak, then social alienation would be growing, and suicide has a greater probability of occurrence. Given the growing sense of social alienation, those who choose suicide consider more about their rights as individuals than responsibility for one another and are thus more inclined to abandon life from an egoistic angle; therefore, egoistic suicide often occurs in such a society. In a society with a moderate degree of kinship bonds, where there are all kinds of separate small-clan or kinship groups, suicide consideration is mixed; altruistic suicide is more likely in groups with close relationship, while egoistic suicide is more likely in those with loose relationship. Therefore, both egoistic suicide and altruistic suicide are likely in such a society.

While the degree of kinship bonds plays a part in determining whether suicide is egoistic or altruistic, the degree of regulatory control usually correlates with suicide of despair and vengeful suicide. In a society with a high degree of regulatory control, people tend to have spiritual experiences or faith as in the case of ancestor worship, from which is derived a series of locally accepted rules that regulate and punish individuals doing harm to the social order, and public opinion plays quite an effective role in such a social structure. Strangely enough, regulatory control may cause problems when it is either too strong or too weak, like two sides of the same coin. When the control is strong, people are deeply aware of how effectively rules will punish those who harm their interests and even the entire social order, and thus are liable to resort to the extreme means of suicide in a predicament so as to seek relief from rules. Such a social structure is often the social foundation of vengeful suicide

with the victims taking suicide as a kind of vengeance on those who cause them to take their lives. Conversely, in a society with a very low degree of regulatory control, people in predicament are liable to fall into “despair” for having no confidence that the related regulatory control system would help them, and suicide of despair often occurs. In societies in between, these two types of suicide might occur in a mixed way, but on the whole, either type would be much less serious than in tight-knit societies and individualisitc societies.

Therefore, we may build an analysis framework to help people to understand relations between the two dimensions of social structure and the ideal types of suicide and of society, as shown in Table 1.

***Table 1*** Structural dimensions, types of suicide, and types of society

| Structural dimension | High/low | Type of suicide | Type of society |
|---|---|---|---|
| Kinship bonds | High | Altruistic suicide | Tight-knit society |
| | Moderate | Mixed | Loose-knit society |
| | Low | Egoistic suicide | Dispersed society |
| Regulatory control | High | Vengeful suicide | Tight-knit society |
| | Moderate | Mixed | Loose-knit society |
| | Low | Suicide of despair | Dispersed society |

In Table 1, we can find that vengeful suicide and altruistic suicide occur mainly in tight-knit societies, suicide of despair and egoistic suicide take place chiefly in individualisitc societies and all the four types can be found in loose-knit societies. From the perspective of social structure, both united and individualisitc societies give rise to the concentration of two suicide types (an individualistic society is in essence another ideal state of a tight-knit society, and similar to a tight-knit society characterized by clans and other super-nuclear families, has nuclear families as the unit of society), while loose-knit societies are characterized by the discrete state of suicide types.

### *3.2.5 Empirical Types of Suicide*

We have classified the ideal types of suicide in the preceding section, which will be crucial for our attempt at simplifying the theory and elaborating in the following chapters the interplay of action and structure. Nevertheless, to better understand the suicide types, it is necessary to look at them in a way that is as close to empirical reality as possible. Having discussed the distribution of the ideal types of suicide, we need to go on to talk about the empirical types, which will be classified according to the motives of suicide.

#### *Benefit-Oriented Empirical Types*

As for egoistic suicide, we further divide it into three types based on empirical data.

One is called “egoistic suicide to evade”, where suicide is committed to evade responsibility for family members and thus lessen physical and mental stress. In some low-income families, for example, middle-aged males are often the breadwinners and pillars of their families, but when seeing little hope of improving their financial situations, some might choose to commit suicide as an escape from the ever growing responsibility for family members. We may go further to make clear how this classification is different from Durkheim’s (1996). This suicide classification is, by his approach, presumably a type of suicide caused by poverty. This difference we may further illustrate with a diagram, as shown in Fig. 1.

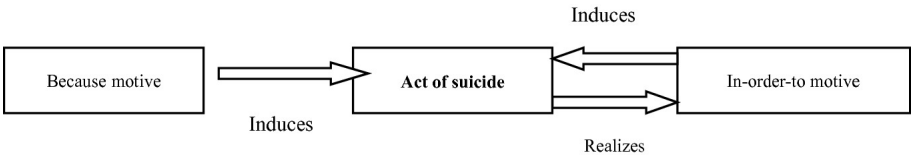

***Fig. 1*** Logic for classification of the types of suicide

Figure 1 provides a simple way of distinguishing my classification from Durkheim's. Durkheim stresses "because motives", that is, factors prior to suicide, which induce the act, whereas I emphasize "in-order-to motives", which are not only an incitement to suicide, but also post-suicide factors that determine whether the particular purpose of suicide could be realized.

The second empirical type is called "egoistic suicide to end suffering", which is committed to escape from physical or mental pains. This type of suicide is often found in patients who want to put an end to unbearable suffering due to physical or mental illness, though no family factors force them to do so.

The third empirical type is "egoistic suicide to vent anger". Unlike the above-mentioned two types, it is the result of an impulse to vent anger on a family member or others because of conflicts in daily life. In our rural surveys, we were often told that so-and-sos should not have committed suicide if they had not take things too hard; such cases largely belong to this type. Different from the other two empirical types, victims of this type did not actually intend to die, with many immediately regretting it and taking measures swiftly to save themselves following the act of committing suicide.

Obviously, by comparison with the corresponding ideal type, the three empirical types, egoistic suicide to evade, to end suffering and to vent anger, are closer to practical experience, and also more easily understandable for researchers with even a modicum of common knowledge about rural life, especially rural phenomena of suicide. Most instances of egoistic suicide, according to empirical data to which I have access, are included in the above described three empirical types.

Correspondingly, there are also three empirical types of altruistic suicide.

The first is altruistic suicide for honor, where victims, who often believe in some fatalistic statements or notions, commit suicide in order not to cause harm to their family members, including a shorter life expectancy. For example, some old people in rural areas chose to commit suicide to prevent their longevity from causing death to their children or younger generations in a broad sense, and this is especially true if there were already cases of people dying young in their family.

The second is altruistic suicide for relief of burden. Contrary to egoistic suicide to evade, victims of this type commit suicide to lessen the burden they think they would cause to their families, since they bring their family not physical resources or other benefits, but financial and mental stress. An example is cases of suicide where victims who were seriously ill but not about to die chose to take their own lives to lessen the burden of their families.

The third is altruistic suicide for responsibility. The purpose is to bear responsibility for one's family member at the expense of one's own life. Generally speaking, the victim bears responsibility for a mistake the family member has made to protect the latter from possible punishment.

### *Harm-Oriented Empirical Types*

While both egoistic and altruistic suicide involve considerations of benefits, suicide may also be viewed from the angle of harm. Suicide of despair is a result of purely harming the self, and vengeful suicide is intended to bring harm to others by harming the self.

As for egoistic suicide, we may also divide it into three empirical types based on empirical data. Unlike the other three types of suicide, in the case of suicide of despair, death is the only and ultimate goal. From the perspective of empirical types, what induces suicide is essentially the aim of the act. In other words, the because motive is the same as the in-order-to motive, and the "social meaning" (Douglas 1967) of suicide is just the realization of the because motive–this is what distinguishes suicide of despair from the other cases of suicide.

The first empirical type is suicide of despair over value, which occurs when the legitimacy or rationality of living is lost and the utter despair causes one to resort to self-killing. As the

resultant death often enhances a system of rules governing the legitimacy or rationality of living, its social meaning is just the because motive that induces it, and in return constitutes its in-order-to motive. Therefore, the because motive coincides with the in-order-to motive.

The second empirical type is suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems, which occurs when the victim's affective needs cannot be satisfied. While suicide for love may well fall into this group, we put it under the category of altruistic suicide for honor given its altruistic nature. Suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems mainly occurs among young people because of failed romance or conflicted arising from extramarital activities.

The third empirical type is suicide of despair over survival problems, which occurs when despairing victims do not have basic necessities for survival. Basic necessities here mean, first and foremost, "food", the most essential thing for human survival. An extreme case is one could but starve to death without committing suicide. Admittedly, not all cases of this type in reality are so extreme, but at least they are close to it. At present, many cases of the suicide of rural old people fall under this type of suicide.

Unlike suicide of despair that is purely self-harming, vengeful suicide, which involves the use of a self-harming means (suicide per se), is aimed at retaliating a particular person. Therefore, we may say there is a motive of harming others. Similarly, depending on the in-order-to motive, and based on empirical data, we may distinguish three empirical types of vengeful suicide.

The first is vengeful suicide as defense against slander, which occurs when a person commits suicide in defense of his or her innocence after feeling wronged by (actual or imagined) slander or vilification. In daily life, slanders occur from time to time. For example, one is slandered as a thief or falsely accused of engaging in extramarital activities. Victims of this type of suicide had expectations for the society, knowing their suicide would prove their innocence and put the blame on the slanderers. It should be noted that a traditional system of rules must play an important role in society, otherwise none would choose to take the extreme action of ending their life. Conversely, in places with a loose, weak or completely modern rules system, the slandered people might, rather than resorting to vengeful suicide, ignore it, or turn to modern rules in fighting back, for example by suing the slanderer for defaming and infringing on the victim's reputation and other rights.

The second is vengeful suicide as a threat. The purpose is not death itself but to use it as a threat in achieving a particular purpose. The prerequisite for this type of suicide is also a society with quite a strong rules system, otherwise the threat will be ineffective and meaningless and none will use suicide as a means of achieving their end. More interestingly, because the actors are not that vengeful and death is not their ultimate goal, they generally would consider preserving their lives as much as possible when choosing the way of suicide, and their attempt at suicide would often fail.

The third is vengeful suicide as a punishment where the suicidal action is used to punish someone who has caused the actor discomfort. The most intense of the three empirical types of vengeful suicide, it is similar in purpose to vengeful suicide as defense against slander. The main distinction between the two empirical types is the latter is aimed, first and foremost, at putting an end to smears, and then at vengeance that is only secondary. Vengeful suicide as punishment is aimed mainly at retaliating against the individuals having caused (physical and mental) discomfort to the actors who are confident that their death would bring punishment to those held accountable. It is also much different from vengeful suicide as a threat. When suicidal action is used as a threat, the actor is delivering the message that "if you don't do as I tell you, I'll kill myself", implying "If you do as I tell you, I'll not kill myself". When suicidal action is used as a punishment, the message delivered is that "I'll kill myself and you'll be punished for my death".

Certainly, in the real world, the distribution of the twelve empirical types of suicide is much more complex and varied than the four ideal types under which they fall. We will analyze the distribution and mechanisms of these ideal and empirical types at great length in later chapters.

# Footnotes

1 These arguments of Confucius and Mencius are embodied in Sima Qian's *Shiji*, when the historian comments on the figures who committed suicide. In *Biography of Boyi*, for instance, Sima Qian thinks very highly of and feels sorry for Boyi: "I'm sorry about the intentions of Boyi." "Shuyi and Boyi count as virtuous men, don't they? They were that virtuous and pure and righteous, but they starved to death. Of his seventy-two disciples, Confucius thought very highly of Yan Hui who was studious. But so often was Yan Hui beset with poverty, not even having enough of chaff and the like, that he died a premature death. Exactly how does Heaven reward good men? (Sima 2000:651–652) As to Xiang Yu who likewise committed suicide, Sima Qian takes a rather different tone and is even critical of him in the *Shiji: Annals of Xiang Yu*: "Xiang Yu could hardly be justified in grumbling the princes and marquises turning their backs on him when he exiled Emperor Yi and proclaimed himself emperor upon having abandoned Guanzhong in favor of the Chu territory. He bragged about his military exploits, showed off his own intelligence, and did not conduct himself as had been the ancients, saying a hegemon must rely on military conquest to rule the world. Eventually, five years later, his state fell, and he died at Dongcheng without realizing that it was all his fault. What a blunder! And instead he claimed his downfall was due to Heaven's will and not his personal failure. How absurd it was!" (Sima 2000:67).

2 In his article "Regional Difference of Rural China: From the Perspective of Social Structure of Village", Professor He Xuefeng characterizes single unitary villages as united villages, other two types of village he calls split villages and dispersed villages. (A 2012 print of He Xuefeng's "Regional Difference of Rural China: From the Perspective of Social Structure of Village" [Z]) My classifications of three types of society—united, split and dispersed, corresponds in essence to Professor He Xuefeng's three types of village structure, but are slightly broader in regional terms and refer to structures of regional society which I have explained briefly by quoting Professor Zhu (2004: 2011) studies.

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# 2. Farmer Suicide in a Tight-Knit Society

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A tight-knit society described in this book is one that features a high degree of kinship bonds and of regulatory control. From the perspective of academic tradition, it is similar to what people call a lineage or quasi-lineage society. From the perspective of past studies on the social structure of suicide, it is close to the society with a high degree of integration as Durkheim noted. Of course, according to Durkheim (1996), societies with a high degree of integration vary from those with a high degree of regulation, resulting in different types of suicide. However, as we have pointed out in the preceding chapter on the theoretical framework, the type of society featuring both strong kinship bonds and regulatory control is one of the three ideal types of social structure based on the empirical reality of China.

## 1 Overview

Three villages that are “close” to a tight-knit society are selected for our investigation into the suicide phenomenon and mechanism in this ideal social type. All located in the same township in the southeast Hubei city of Daye, the three adjacent villages are technically renamed Feng, Cha and Zhao in the book for consideration of academic ethics. I conducted the fieldwork in Feng Village,[1] while Yang Hua was responsible for the fieldwork in Cha Village and Yuan Song in Zhao Village.[2] We all started our fieldwork on July 5, 2009. Yang Hua and Yuan Song finished their work on July 25, and mine in Feng Village ended on August 6 that year. The population in the three villages totalled 6613.[3]

Data we collected on suicide deaths and attempts mainly spans the 30 years from 1980 to 2009. A total of 90 suicide deaths are recorded in the time frame, as shown in Table 1.

***Table 1*** Suicide deaths among farmers in a tight-knit society (persons, %)

| Gender | Age groups | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Young (15–34) | Middle-aged (35–59) | Old (60 and above) | |
| Male | 7 (7.78) | 3 (3.33) | 11 (12.22) | 21 (23.33) |
| Female | 49 (54.44) | 6 (6.67) | 14 (15.56) | 69 (76.67) |
| Total | 56 (62.22) | 9 (10.00) | 25 (27.78) | 90 (100.00) |

Table 1 lists numbers of deaths by suicide in the three villages from 1980 to 2009. We can clearly see from the “Total” column that, young people have the largest number of suicide deaths, followed by the elderly who record less than half as many, while suicide deaths among the middle-aged are relatively few, least prominent in the entire suicide distribution. From the perspective of gender, female suicide is more common in a tight-knit society, with the number of suicides among women more than triple that among men. See the percentage figures in brackets in Table 1 for proportions of suicide deaths among each demographic group.

We can thus generalize about the features of suicide in a tight-knit society based on the percentage figures in Table 1: First, the suicide phenomenon occurs most often among young adults whose suicide deaths account for 62.22%, or more than three-fifths of the total. Second, the phenomenon of female suicide is quite serious, accounting for as high as 76.67%, or nearly four-fifths of all suicide deaths. Third, in the distribution of suicide deaths by gender and age, young women accounted for 54.44%, or more than half of the total number of suicide deaths. Thus, to understand suicide in a tight-knit society, we need to elucidate the problem among young women which can help us explain more than half of the suicide cases in this type of society.

In our investigation, we roughly divide the people surveyed into three age groups: young (15–34), middle-aged (35–59) and old (60 and above). Unless otherwise specified, the classification applies in the whole book. This is also a method of classification widely seen in official and academic research reports today. (World Health Organization 2000:102–103; Phillips etc. 2002:835–840) See Table 2 for the population composition by gender and age in the three villages all of which are examples of tight-knit society.

***Table 2*** Population composition by gender and age in three villages with features of tight-knit society (persons)

| Gender | Age groups | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Young | Middle-aged | Old |
| Male | 1240 | 954 | 262 |
| Female | 1149 | 925 | 291 |
| Total | 2389 | 1879 | 553 |

The data in Table 2, collected in the fieldwork from July to August 2009, is used in this book as the basis to calculate the average annual suicide rate which is also the crude suicide rate mentioned above. See Table 3 for the suicide rate distribution by gender and age.

***Table 3*** Suicide rate by gender and age, 1980–2009 (1/100,000)

| Gender | Age groups | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Young | Middle-aged | Old |
| Male | 18.82 | 10.48 | 139.95 |
| Female | 142.15 | 21.62 | 160.37 |
| Total | 78.14 | 15.97 | 150.69 |

First of all, the overall average annual suicide rate in the three villages was 45.37 per 100,000 people during the 30 years from 1980 to 2009.

By age, the suicide rate of young people is very high, reaching 78.14 per 100,000 people. Although the suicide rate of the elderly is as high as 150.69 per 100,000 people, it has a lot to do with the fact that the population of the elderly is much smaller than that of the young. We may better see what that means, if we had the number of suicide deaths among young adults divided by the population of the elderly, which would result in a staggering suicide rate of 337.55 per 100,000 people. Certainly, the discussions on the suicide rate among the young and old adults will be limited to the respective age groups only. As for the suicide rate of the middle-aged, since its total population is close to that of young people, a conclusion can be made from the stark difference in data that young people have a much more serious suicide rate than the middle-aged.

By gender, young women are about 7.6 times more likely to commit suicide than young men, and the suicide rate of middle-aged women is more than twice that of their male counterparts. However, the difference between the suicide rates of elderly women and men is not stark. Therefore, from the perspective of gender, we know that in a tight-knit society, on the whole, women are far more likely to take their own lives than men, and gender difference in suicide is particularly prominent among young adults. Simply put, the high

suicide rate among young women contributes most to the gender gap in suicide in a tight-knit society.

## 2 Types of Farmer Suicide in a Tight-Knit Society

As the first step, we examine the suicide distribution in a tight-knit society from the perspective of the four ideal types: egoistic suicide, altruistic suicide, vengeful suicide, and suicide of despair, as shown in Table 4.

***Table 4*** Distribution of basic types of farmer suicide in a tight-knit society

| Type of suicide | Egoistic suicide | Altruistic suicide | Vengeful suicide | Suicide of despair | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of people | 18 | 7 | 46 | 18 | 1 |
| Percentage (%) | 20.00 | 7.78 | 51.11 | 20.00 | 1.11 |

From Table 4, we can clearly see that vengeful suicide ranks first among the four types of suicide, accounting for more than 50%, followed by egoistic suicide and suicide of despair, both standing at 20%. Altruistic suicide occurs the least frequently among the four types, though, as we shall see in later chapters, its share of the total in a tight-knit society is greater than in the other two types of society. There is one case assigned to the “Other” category because it can hardly be put under any other category due to the lack of information on the victim’s motive.

Table 4 only provides a rough picture of the distribution of suicide types in a tight-knit society. What we need to further clarify is how these suicide types are distributed by gender and age.

Table 5 offers a general look at the distribution of suicide types by gender and age. Based on the data in the table, we can see that the proportion of vengeful suicide among young women reaches a staggering 40%, in sharp contrast to any other type of suicide in a specified group, all of which stands below 10%. Therefore, on the basis of the data tabulated here, we may conclude that vengeful suicide of young women deserves our most attention as we look into the problem of suicide in a tight-knit society.

***Table 5*** Distribution of basic suicide types by gender and age in a tight-knit society (%)

| Type of suicide | Egoistic suicide | | Altruistic suicide | | Vengeful suicide | | Suicide of despair | | Other | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| Young | 5.56 | 5.56 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 1.11 | 40.00 | 1.11 | 8.89 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| Middle-aged | 1.11 | 3.33 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 3.33 | 1.11 | 0.00 | 1.11 | 0.00 |
| Old | 1.11 | 3.33 | 2.22 | 5.56 | 5.56 | 1.11 | 3.33 | 5.56 | 0.00 | 0.00 |

After clarifying the general distribution of the basic types of suicide, we then go further and examine the suicide distribution by factoring in the 12 empirical types we have classified before, thus enabling us to further understand how different types of suicide are distributed in the realistic experience and what basic characteristics they may have. See Table 6 for the distribution of suicide by empirical type.

***Table 6*** Distribution of suicide by empirical type in the tight-knit society

| Basic type | Egoistic suicide | | | Altruistic suicide | | | Suicide of despair | | | Vengeful suicide | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Empirical type | Evade | End suffering | Vent anger | Honor | Relief of burden | Responsibility | Value | Marriage and relationship problems | Survival problem | Defense against slander | Threat | |
| Number of people | 6 | 0 | 12 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 10 | 3 | 1 | 17 | |
| Percentage (%) | 6.67 | 0.00 | 13.33 | 2.22 | 3.33 | 2.22 | 5.56 | 11.11 | 3.33 | 1.11 | 18.89 | |

According to Table 6, vengeful suicide as a punishment, which typically involves a conflict at its most severe and intense, comes first, accounting for 31.11%, followed by vengeful suicide as a threat (18.89%). The third, fourth, fifth and sixth places are egoistic suicide to vent anger (13.33%), suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems (11.11%), egoistic suicide to evade (6.67%) and suicide of despair over value (5.56%). Apart from these, the other empirical types all take up relatively small shares. However, it should be noted that though no case collected during our survey falls into the category of egoistic suicide to end suffering, it does not mean this empirical type does not exist in a tight-knit society but it occurs infrequently in the type of society surveyed. As we have emphasized at the beginning of this chapter, we place greater values on relative numbers which better indicate the trends or general situation of suicide, rather than absolute numbers and their meanings. The significant shares of vengeful suicides as a punishment and those as a threat (the former in particular due to intense conflicts often involved) point to the fact that in a tight-knit society, most suicide cases would cause a sensation. As stated in preceding paragraphs that altruistic suicide mainly occurs among the elderly, that is also the case for its three empirical types.

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# 3 Changes in Farmer Suicide in a Tight-Knit Society

When we look at suicide rates or suicide types, we need to observe their changes over time apart from the variations between different groups, in order to get a better picture of changes in suicides.

## 3.1 Overall Changes in Suicide Rate in a Tight-Knit Society

As the first step to examine how the suicide rate of tight-knit society changes over time, we might as well take 10 years as a basis to look into it, as shown in Table 7.

***Table 7*** Suicide rates by decade in a tight-knit society (1/100,000)

| Decade | 1980–1989 | 1990–1999 | 2000–2009 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Suicide rate | 45.37 | 69.56 | 21.17 |

Table 7 reveals that the suicide rate in a tight-knit society has undergone significant changes across the 30 years. And I have explained earlier that cases of farmer suicide were rare in a tight-knit society in the 1970s, except for a very small number of suicides for political reasons by the so-called “five categories of people” (landlords, rich farmers, bad elements, counter-revolutionaries and rightists). Thus, an alarming suicide rate of 45.37 per 100,000 people in the 1980s means that an apparent “suicide wave” took place. Showing no signs of decline in the 1990s, this “suicide wave” continued to run high, reaching 69.56 per 100,000 people. In the 10 years since 2000, the suicide rate in a tight-knit society experienced a dramatic drop, standing at 21.17 per 100,000 people.

We then can further break it down by studying the changes of suicide rate on a five-year basis, as shown in Table 8.

***Table 8*** Suicide rates by five-year period in a tight-knit society (1/100,000)

| Period | 1980- | 1985- | 1990- | 1995- | 2000- | 2005- |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Suicide rate | 48.39 | 42.34 | 57.46 | 81.66 | 24.19 | 18.15 |

Five years is a good time interval for the observation of suicide rate variation. Should the interval be shorter than five years, say, one year, the suicide rate might see quite dramatic fluctuations due to all kinds of contingencies, which serves no useful purpose as we try to get to the bottom of the suicide wave. For instance, suppose in one year the sudden death of a few people led to a sharp rise in the suicide rate, while numbers stayed quite stable for other years. This situation cannot be satisfactorily explained.

According to Table 8, compared with the 1970s, the suicide rate posted a significant growth during the period of 1980–1984, while we do not see much difference in terms of suicide rate between 1985–1989 and 1980–1984. However, the time frame of 1990–1994 distinguished itself from the previous two periods. From 1995 to 1999, suicides rose sharply on the basis of the early 1990s and reached the peak of the 30 years. After that, the suicide rate began to fall dramatically. In the five years after 2005, it continued to fall until it reached its historic low in 30 years.

## 3.2 Changes in Suicide Rate by Age and Gender

It is not nearly enough to just figure out the overall changes in the suicide rate in a tight-knit society. Just like how we have analyzed the different types of suicide among different groups before, we need to continue to eliminate the major fallacy of treating farmer suicides in China as a whole, and look into suicide rates among different groups. We need to be clear about how the overall change in suicide rates is shaped and the specific demographic responsible for the variation. Therefore, we conduct a more detailed examination of the changes of gender- and age-specific suicide rates over time.

Similarly, we first have a glance over the suicide rate changes in the three decades by gender and age, as shown in Table 9.

***Table 9*** Changes in gender- and age-specific suicide rate in a tight-knit society, 1980–2009 (1/100,000)

| **Decade** | | **1980–1989** | | **1990–1999** | | **2000–2009** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | | **Male** | **Female** | **Male** | **Female** | **Male** | **Female** |
| Age groups | Young | 24.19 | 156.66 | 16.13 | 252.39 | 16.13 | 17.41 |
| | Middle-aged | 10.48 | 32.43 | 20.96 | 32.43 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| | Old | 38.17 | 137.46 | 114.50 | 240.55 | 267.18 | 103.09 |

The data in Table 9 suggests that suicide rates fluctuated widely mainly among young women. And given the low suicide rate seen in the 1970s and the fact that the suicide deaths mainly occurring among the “five categories of people”, we have reason to infer that the suicide rate of young women was even lower in the 1970s. Therefore, the 1980s witnessed a remarkable increase in the suicide rate of young women and this uptrend continued into the 1990s, causing the number to be about 1.6 times that of the 1980s, a quite large margin. However, after 2000, the suicide rate among young women experienced a sharp drop. And that’s about 14.5 times lower than the peak in the 1990s! Consistently lower than the suicide rate of young women in the 30 years, the suicide rate of young men began to decline in the 1990s and remained roughly the same as in the previous decade after 2000. And it should be noted that the gender difference in the suicide rate of young people both in the 1980s and 1990s was stark. Specifically, the difference in the former decade was about 6.5 times, while the latter about 15.6 times. Nevertheless, after 2000, the gender difference almost disappeared and was practically negligible. The changes in the suicide rate of the young adults indicate that the suicide waves in the 1980s and 1990s were mainly due to a surge in suicides among young women. And after 2000, it was the same demographic, the suicide rate of which experienced a rapid decrease, that brought about the decline in the suicide wave. Compared with the obvious gender difference in the previous 20 years, the gender gap in suicides of the young people narrowed after 2000 and suicides were no longer a particularly serious problem for young women alone.

The overall change in suicide rates among the middle-aged was less pronounced during the first 20 years; middle-aged women’s suicide rates remained almost the same and those among their male counterparts saw an increase in the 1990s which, however, was insignificant compared with the notable change seen among young women. After 2000, the suicide rate of middle-aged people in a tight-knit society also saw a marked decline.

The overall suicide rate of the elderly rose quite significantly in the 30 years. Therefore, it can be said that the elderly is the only age group that shows a gradual increase in suicide

rate in the three decades. Compared with the 1980s, the suicide rate of the elderly rose for both genders in the 1990s. Suicides increased about three times among elderly men, and 1.7 times among elderly women. After 2000, while elder women's suicide rate declined to a level close to that of the 1980s, the suicide rate among elder men rose about 2.3 times from the 1990s. Thus, the overall suicide rate in the age group was on the rise, opposite to the change in the suicide rate among young people. However, as we have previously done with changes in overall suicide rates, we proceed to track changes in age- and gender-specific suicide rates in every five-year interval. We find that variation in suicide rates among the young on a five-year basis was largely consistent with that on a ten-year basis, but for the elderly, the suicide rate changed in a different way on a ten-year basis from a five-year basis.

### 3.3 Changes in the Proportions of Different Types of Suicide in a Tight-Knit Society

We still adopt a general-to-specific approach, by first examining the distribution of the basic types of suicide in a tight-knit society. It is worth noting that since there is one case of suicide with unknown motive (thus assigned to the Other category) during 1980–1989, the suicide deaths are counted as 89 for all the years surveyed, and 29 for the 1980–1989 period (30 if we count in the suicide with unknown motive). The data is shown in Table 10.

***Table 10*** Changes over time in shares of different types of suicide type in a tight-knit society (%)

| Decade | Suicide type | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Egoistic suicide | Altruistic suicide | Suicide of despair | Vengeful suicide |
| 1980–1989 | 20.69 | 10.34 | 6.90 | 62.07 |
| 1990–1999 | 17.39 | 4.35 | 26.09 | 52.17 |
| 2000–2009 | 28.57 | 14.29 | 28.57 | 28.57 |

While the share of egoistic suicides did not vary greatly between the 1980s and the 1990s, that of altruistic suicides in the 1990s decreased by half from the previous decade. Both types of suicide saw a relatively noticeable rise after 2000. The suicides of despair changed moderately from the 1990s to the 2000s, but compared with the 1980s, there was a more obvious increase. Vengeful suicide experienced the most striking change during the three decades. On a downward trend, this type of suicide declined by almost half in the post-2000 decade compared with the 1990s, and dropped nearly 10% in the 1990s from the 1980s.

It can be said that over the 30 years, the proportions of different types of suicide changed greatly. Vengeful suicide, which had occurred far more frequently than all the other types, and altruistic suicide, which had also taken up a significant share, both experienced a decrease over time. Egoistic suicide and suicide of despair became the most common types of suicide. Based on our previous analysis, the upward trend will predictably continue in egoistic suicide and suicide of despair, and so will the downward trend in the other two suicide types.

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## 4 Mechanism for Farmer Suicide in a Tight-Knit Society

### 4.1 Mechanism for Vengeful Suicide Among Farmers in a Tight-Knit Society

Based on the preceding analysis, we have already known that, the key to understanding the suicide mechanism in a tight-knit society is to understand the occurrence and transformation of vengeful suicide. We will begin by presenting a detailed account of a vengeful suicide from the perspective of suicidal action, and then proceed to discussion. See Case 2.1.

**Case 2.1**

The case took place in Wangjiawan, Feng Village. Liu Ying, who was born in 1961 and married Wang Dingfu in 1981, took her own life in the summer of 1984 even before having any children.

The couple had been living with Wang's parents after marriage. Wang worked at a nearby coal mine and was not at home during the day except when he came back for lunch. The farm work was mainly handled by Wang's parents and wife. On a scorching day during the rush harvesting and planting season in 1984, unwilling to work outside, Liu Ying stayed at home, which triggered the rebuke of her mother-in-law who scolded Liu as "being gluttonous and lazy" and demanded that she go out to work. Liu refused and a fierce quarrel broke out. The husband was told about it when back home for lunch. He blamed his wife for talking back to his mother. The wife had thought her husband would stand with her. However, she was reproved by him, which she deemed as a clear signal that both her husband and her mother-in-law were "bullying" her. Therefore, she also had a row with her husband. Wang thought his wife totally immune to reason. In his opinion, contending against parents was wrong in itself and it was even more wrong for his wife, instead of obeying him, to argue with him when he was trying to reason things out with her. Overwhelmed with fury, he gave his wife a sound beating. After lunch, Wang, as always, went to the coal mine for work. However, the wife's temperature didn't cool. The more she thought about it, the more she perceived herself as being bullied. After her husband left, she picked up a bottle of pesticides and guzzled it. Unsure about the effect of the pesticides, she ran out and jumped into a pond in front of the house, trying to drown herself. No sooner had she thrown herself than she died.

Up to this point, we can initially find two important factors. One is the conflict between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law revolving around farm work arrangement. The other is the husband-wife conflict caused essentially by the conflict between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Unlike his mother who just simply scolded the wife as "being gluttonous and lazy", Wang, according to his cousin, Wang Dingying, "mainly blamed his wife for not obeying his mother." "I didn't pay much attention to the fight between Liu and my aunt. Until I heard the bickering between the couple, I tried to mediate. On the one hand, like my cousin, I also thought it's wrong for Liu to confront my aunt. On the other, I criticized Wang while seeing Liu who had already taken a beating by him." "Liu said that she was going to kill herself by drinking pesticides and then have her family to take revenge for her." "Worried about her attempt suicide, I comforted her a little more and left after seeing her mood stabilized. I didn't expect that only after a few hours, I would hear from someone outside who said she had killed herself by taking pesticides."

In this case, the reason why the mother-in-law dared to scold her daughter-in-law is that she believed she had the "right" to do something with the "laziness" of her daughter-in-law. For Wang Dingfu, however, he held that his wife didn't have the "right" to be against his mother's "rebuke" and he himself certainly had the "right" to correct his wife's behavior, hence the tongue-lashing and even beating of his wife. As the main mediator, Wang Dingying, the person he took first care of when mediating was his "aunt", that is to say, he was the same as Wang Dingfu in terms of the attitude towards seniors and the way of handling things. For the beating of Liu Ying, he just "pitied her" instinctively from a man's point of view. His words of comfort do not mean that he related to her behavior. Of course, when hearing Liu declaring to commit suicide with pesticides, based on his life experience, he knew that this "declaration" might become a reality, so he "comforted her a little more" and left after guessing that she probably had given up the idea of suicide. But Liu Ying's acts of drinking pesticides and then drowning herself reveal her firm determination to end her life. And her claim to have her family to seek revenge for her is by no means merely a threat, but the most essential in-order-to motive of the suicide. So, what's behind all this? We can learn more by following the story after her death.

Liu Ying's parents lived in Liujiawan, Taihe District, E'zhou City. According to the locals, the Liu's clan was the biggest and most influential in Taihe. After Liu Ying's death, her husband sent the news to Liu's parents, and the latter immediately asked more than 30 fellow villagers to come along with the messenger to Wangjiawan that afternoon to see what had happened. Seeing wounds on Liu's body, they thought the young woman had been beaten to death by the Wangs, but they came back without saying much about it.

On that night, 10 tractors carried over 300 people of Liujiawan, men and women, old and young, to Wangjiawan, to avenge Liu Ying's death, a practice known as *darenming* in rural tradition. The first thing they did was to smash Wang's home into a mess, with all the furniture destroyed. Du Guanghui, chief of Wangjiawan came to coordinate at the request of people of Wangjiawan. Due to the absence of Wang Xiansheng, the branch secretary, who was having a district-level meeting at the time and had the highest authority in Wangjiawan, people of Wangjiawan dared not counterattack at the beginning. What's more, because the fact that it was after marrying Wang Guanfu that Liu committed suicide was clear and indisputable, they could only let people of Liujiawan vent their anger first, and then reason with them. After all the smashing, cigaretts were offered by people of Wangjiawan as a gesture of good will to the Liu family who was burning with wrath, only to be teared up, thrown on the ground and trampled over. People of Wangjiawan then prepared bountiful tables in hopes that the Liu family would first finish the dinner before talking things over. However, no sooner had the meals been delivered than people of Liujiawan toppled all the tables and smashed the bowls and chopsticks into pieces. People of Wangjiawan were finally infuriated by their utterly unresonable acts and the "airs" they put on. After all, people of Wangjiawan who shared a common ancestor, had a population of more than 1000. Neck and neck, the two sides were at daggers drawn. In this hostile and tense climate, Du Guanghui, from Dujiawan, estimated that a serious fight between the two sides might occur. A village head as he was, he sent someone for the branch secretary Wang Xiansheng, the most authoritative person in the village to take charge.

The initial episodes of *darenming* reveal the horror and publicness of the incident. Means used by the Liu family were those typical in this region. According to incomplete statistics, among the cases of suicide deaths in the selected three villages as a tight-knit society, there were a total of 30 cases that had experienced large-scale *darenming*. For the Liu family, the violent scene alleviated their anger, while for Liu Ying, who died by suicide, it was one of the situations she wanted to see. From this, we can preliminarily judge that Liu Ying's suicide and her resoluteness shown through her method of suicide suggest the great retaliatory nature of the suicide.

In the next morning, people of Liujiawan transported more of their people with 10 tractors, driving the total number of people who came to Wangjiawan for *darenming* up to nearly 500, which made Wang Xiansheng have to abandon the meeting and come back to deal with the matter. When he returned, he found that people of Liujiawan, who had arrived at the village office building, were smashing the office. The Liu family started overstepping the boundary by targeting the village-level government, an escalation of their actions which should have been limited to the retaliation against the Wang Family. Though furious at the scene, the secretary still tried his best to suppress his anger. He asked Du to notify the village cadres, 23 in total, of an emergency meeting with only one subject: to drive away the people who were involved in *darenming*. First, role and task assignment. Strategically speaking, because Wang Xiansheng was both the village leader and a member of Wangjiawan, it was inappropriate for him to directly mediate between the two sides. Therefore, Du Guanghui was named as the commander-in-chief, responsible for action deployment,

while the actual decision-making was jointly made by Du and Wang Xiansheng. In addition, some village cadres were sent to the district police station and the county public security bureau to report the case, and the other called up more than 5,000 villagers in the whole village.[4] Likewise, people of Liujiawan also reported to the public security bureau of Taihe District. The public security organs of the two sides quickly reponded. Daye city dispatched a 20-member criminal police team, all with live ammunition, while Taihe district also deployed 10 heavily armed criminal policemen. In addition, representatives of various institutions of the two sides, including local district police stations, civil affairs and judicial authorities, came to the site promptly. Meanwhile, Wang Xiansheng suggested people of Wangjiawan should observe two policies–"Three Don'ts" and "One Must": do not give people of Liujiawan food and drink, because they have ungratefully wasted the food many times; do not scold them first, because it's, after all, an ironclad fact that Liu Ying took her own life here in Liujiawan; similarly, based on the same consideration, do not hit Liujiawan people with the first punch. If people in Liujiawan attack first, thus breaking the "Three Don'ts" policy, people of Wangjiawan must adopt the policy of "One Must", that is, people of Wangjiawan must fight back in self-defense.

Up to this stage of *darenming*, the horrifying atmosphere pervaded not only the family of the suicide, but the villages. As the situation evolved, it gradually got the two villages involved, going beyond the two families of Wang and Liu.

Since the public security forces on both sides had arrived, an emergency meeting was held on the spot. Handing over the burden to the public security forces, Wang Xiansheng and Du promised that all actions would be under the command of the public security forces and the villagers would actively cooperate. Meanwhile, morale of people of Liujiawan were apparently getting lower because of the sheer number of people of Wangjiawan gathering as well as the two stringent policies declared by Wang Xiansheng, setting the stage for a substantive negotiation between the two sides. During the negotiation, people of Liujiawan put forward seven requirements:

First, bury the deceased with "Duiqiang Yuanhua Shoufang". "Shoufang" means "coffin", the most superior kind of which is called "Duiqiang Yuanhua" locally. According to locals, no one had used this kind of coffin in Wangjiawan since their ancestor took root more than 400 years ago.

Second, the deceased shall be clothed with seven layers of shrouds made of silks and satins. However, based on the tradition of Feng Village, generally, the deceased shall be dressed in two layers, with a maximum of three. The idea of so-called seven layers of silks and satins had been unprecedented since the ancestor of people of Wangjiawan settled down more than 400 years ago.

Third, the husband's whole family must put on mourning apparel. His parents shall wear gunny mourning garment which indicated the filial piety of sons and daughters-in-law, and the husband shall carry his wife's spirit tablet (with the name, birthday, etc. of the dead inscribed). However, in this geographic area where tight-knit society is located, only sons and daughters-in-law of the departed could wear mourning apparel and spirit tablets must only be carried by the son of the deceased. Such unreasonable requirement put forward by people of Liujiawan, in fact, means that Liu Ying's parents-in-law were being taken as her son and daughter-in-law and the husband as her son. Certainly, this is a huge humiliation to the Wang family.

Fourth, a three-day fast shall be conducted. To conduct a fast means to perform Buddhist or Daoist rites to appease and pray for the dead. Conventionally, only a one-day fast is required in the region. Therefore, a three-day fast is also very demanding. Moreover, for abnormal deaths, especially suicides, a fast is not allowed according to the customs of Feng Village.

Fifth, a pair of gold earrings must be worn for the dead. Gold earrings were considered valuable in the countryside at that time in 1984. This, as a way of elaborate burial, is to “consume the financial resources” of the Wang family.

Sixth, the body of the dead shall be allowed to enter the room, especially the central room (or the hall, the most important room in the design of rural houses. The front wall of it usually has ancestral memorial tablets or sacrificial plaques for worshiping heaven,earth, emperors, ancestors and educators). This requirement is also an “overclaim”, because people in Feng Village believed that if the corpse was dragged around and then placed in the central room, the family would never be at peace, with the ghost of the suicide always haunting in and around the room, until the ghost has a replacement, namely, ghost of the next suicide.

Seventh, the husband’s mother shall comb the deceased’s hairs. Traditionally, in Feng Village, combing for the dead is done by the sons or daughters. Like the third one, this is actually trying to break seniority in the Wang family and insult the mother-in-law who caused the wife to commit suicide.

Both sides had an intense negotiation over the sevevn requirements. On the fourth day into it, people of Wangjiawan only finally agreed to use “Yuanhua Shoufang”(inferior to “Duiqiang Yuanhua Shoufang” and cost about 600 yuan in 1984, a quite expensive item then in the countryside). And the dead could only be clothed with 3 layers of shrouds made of satins only. None of the other requirements were met, especially for the third, sixth and seventh, there was no room for negotiation at all. People of Wangjiawan said: “we would rather have another ‘person’ die than spoil this ‘ghost’.”

Undoubtedly “very excessive” for people of Wangjiawan, these seven requirements by people of Liujiawan are aimed at taking revenge on the people who caused Liu Ying’s death. The third, sixth and seventh ones, in the opinion of the people of Wangjiawan, are nothing short of “earth-shaking”. Therefore, these demands would never ever be met in any case. Yet, people of Liujiawan themselves knew exactly what “demanding” requirements they were putting forward. The benchmark for judging whether these requirements were “demanding” or not is a knowledge system shared by both sides. For villages with strong color of clan and community memory, traditions on how the seniors and juniors should be approached as well as ceremony and rituals could not be emphasized too much. Precisely due to the rigidity of the rituals which people in Liujiawan knew too well, they brought forward such claims contrary to the normal circumstances as an insult to people of Wangjiawan and a punishment of those responsible for the suicide as well. And to Liu Ying, who also shared the same knowledge system, her bid to end her own life got paid off. Thus, her claim that she would take pesticides to die so that her family would then avenge her death has a strong realistic possibility.

At noon on the fifth day, the sun shimmered harshedly on the ground. The corpse outside the central room began to rot from stomach, giving off a foul smell. Things couldn’t be like this anymore. This must stop. People of Liujiawan forcibly lifted the body, trying to rush into the central room, only to be blocked by layers of human shield. A large-scale violent clan conflict using improvised weapons was on the verge of breaking out, leaving the public security forces at their wit’s end. At this moment, the secretary Wang Xiansheng walked to the front to preside. And the public security bureaus on both sides suggested that the village leader take charge and they actively cooperate in the operation. The secretary ordered: The body must be buried immediately anyway, given such a hot weather and the situation going on for so many days! A total of 30 people from the public security bureaus on both sides were asked to load the bullets of the guns, expose all the handcuffs, and then surround the corpse completely. Whoever dared to gather together and cause any trouble would be met with warning shots and arrest! Aware of how serious the matter became, people of

Wangjiawan took the opportunity to lift the corpse, and with a sound of “Oh-ho”, they carried it towards Dingjiashan, a cemetery hill where only suicides were buried. And that brought the matter to an abrupt end.

At this point, it can be said the matter was over. Disadvantaged in number of people gathering, people of Liujiawan knew that they could not win and had to give up. What’s worse, some elderly people were so hungry that they began to vomit bile, and young people were severely exhausted. By this time, they had not eaten anything for three days and two nights since they overturned the tables when people of Wangjiawan prepared food for them. People of Wangjiawan had to make another four tables of meals, asking the people who were not remote relatives of Liu Ying to stay. Others were let go back to their own homes.

Case 2.1 is a very detailed case of vengeful suicide, which shows the cause-motivation of the suicide bid (the conflict between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law due to farm work arrangement led to husband-wife conflict, and then possible suicide actions), the in-order-to motive(Liu Ying’s declaration that she would have her family take revenge for her in the wake of her death), the execution(drinking a bottle of pesticides and then drowning herself), the completion(death), the follow-up effect after death(*darenming*, among others that derived from the suicide).

Case 2.1 is a typical case of vengeful suicide as a punishment. In fact, an overwhelming majority of cases of vengeful suicide as a punishment which has the largest proportion among the empirical types of vengeful suicide bear similarity to Case 2.1. In particular, from the perspective of the internal generation mechanism, no matter what the specific details of these cases are, the internal mechanisms are basically the same.

The follow-up effect of vengeful suicide as a punishment is obviously quite strong. The relatively “ideal” ending of Case 2.1 can be attributed to the roughly same size of clans both parties belonged to. Violence still was staged between two sides evenly matched in strength. Understandably, it would be another story for parties having giant clan power gap in between. On the one hand, if the wife’s family was far less powerful than the husband’s family, limited by strength, the former often wouldn’t be able to defend the deceased female’s rights in real sense. More often than not, they, therefore, would just demand a sensible explanation. The powerful family of the husband, however, when confronted with challenges from the other side, would make a courtesy apology and console the wife’s family in the form of an elaborate burial. On the other hand, if it’s the opposite–the wife’s family was strong while the husband’s family weak, fierce conflicts, even direct “armed clashes” could occur, because the wife’s family is fully capable to make those requirements as in Case 2.1 and even demand more, for example, directly asking those responsible for the suicide death to be buried alive with the dead. The typical approach is to ask those people to “lay at the bottom of the coffin”. At this time, physical violence would be almost unavoidable, triggering reactions from members of the husband’s family ranging from hiding away out of fear to killing themselves to “avoid punishment”.

In addition to young married women who resorted to vengeful suicide to punish the counterparty of the conflict, there were also a small number of elderly people who chose to kill themselves as a way to penalize their unfilial children, invoking the same norms of consensus in a tight-knit society. See Case 2.2.

**Case 2.2**

In the early 1980s, Ke Han's father in Cha Village killed himself by taking pesticides as a result of a conflict with his son. Judging from the whole story, we conclude that this is still a typical case of vengeful suicide as a punishment.

Ke Han had been dissatisfied with his father mainly because he thought that he hadn’t benefitted from his father’s position as a village cadre. In his eyes, his father's whole-hearted devotion to public interests was a form of stupidity at the expense of his own son’s

future. When talking about his father's death, the son began with the injustice he had suffered when his father had not been a village cadre.

> In 1968, Ke Han wanted to join the army, but eventually was not taken into consideration for one of the only three quotas reserved for the brigade (a kind of military unit). For this reason, he cursed the then brigade branch secretary for several days. He mentioned this incident to explain that "my father had no authority for he was not the head of the brigade then, so I didn't blame him". After 1970, the father became the head of the brigade, which the son translated as "being powerful". However, as a main leader of the brigade, the father who had acted impartially hadn't brought any benefit for his son. Thus, the son often scolded, "You have been a cadre for decades, and there hasn't been a worker (an honorable profession at that time) in our family, nor a soldier. What's the point of being a cadre?" "Those cadres all know how to make arrangements for their children to be a worker or a soldier. You have been working for the Communist Party for decades, but we haven't got any advantage out of it." "I suffered an injustice when signing up for the army. But I do not blame you, because at that time you had no power. Now you have the power, but still let me toil and moil in the countryside. How can I vent my anger If I do not complain about you? You only take care of the public affairs, completely ignoring the family and leaving everything to mother. What's the use of you being a cadre?" "You are a Communist Party member while your son isn't even able to have a chance to join the army. It just doesn't make any sense!" In the face of his son's accusation, the father had always responded by lecturing him: "You being a senior, since when it's your turn to defy your father?".
>
> Apart from the longstanding resentment at those matters, Ke Han also held a grudge about his father's premature decision to separate him and his wife out from the family. He said that he was separated out just in the second year of marriage. His wife was then only 19 years old, not so sensible nor good at work, which, in Ke Han's view, was why the separation shouldn't happen. But Ke's father thought that it made more sense to separate the couple out so that they could learn to live independently early since his young and ignorant daughter-in-law, unable to run the family, cook or even wash clothes, would have to assume her role as a wife sooner or later.

Yet, what really caused the suicide was the way Ke handled the relationship between his mother-in-law and his father.

> Two pigs Ke's mother-in-law was raising went to Kejiawan and ate the sweet potatoes there. As a result, people of Kejiawan killed the two beasts by poisoning them with pesticides. In response, Ke's mother-in-law came to Kejiawan to "squabble" over the matter. Ke, the son-in-law, stood with her, accusing those who had killed the pigs with poison. Those who had been reprimanded went to Ke's father (a cadre in the village then) to complain about this, and even twisted the facts by saying that his son had said nasty things about him. Some of them went so far as to tell the older Ke that his son had declared that should his father try to intervene the son would "kill him".. Ke's father was infuriated. In his opinion, it was not right for Ke's mother-in-law's two pigs to come to Kejiawan and devour the sweet potatoes, and they were killed by poison, that might have been the end of that. There is no justification for the offending party to turn around and accuse us of wrongdoing. Making matters worse, not only could Ke not tell right from wrong, he even sided with his mother-in-law and reprimanded his own father. This was a "major breach" of moral norms and a row broke out between father and son. The two had often been at odds with and didn't have much trust in each other, so, Ke could not make his father believe him even when he tried to explain. The next day, Ke's mother-in-law went to Kejiawan again. She took a nap on the way, and didn't stay for long. Ke's father happened to see all of this and assumed she had

come in order to “milk” Kejiawan. It was August of the lunar calendar, the prime growing season for the late rice. At night, a number of people in Kejiawan who were at enmity with Ke went to the field belonging to one of the families involved in poisoning Ke’s mother-in-law’s pigs and cut the rice plants, and then framed Ke’s brother-in-law and mother-in-law, making it look like revenge for the death of two pigs. Not only did Ke’s father do nothing to stop the spread of the “rumor”, but he also began to think that his son’s mother-in-law’had come to Kejiawan the day before to case the area in preparation for the plant destruction. The family whose rice was cut took to the street cursing and yelling. Ke didn’t think his brother-in-law had the guts to do something like that, nor did would his mother-in-law, and that it must have been be a set-up by someone in Kejiawan. Thus, he shouted abuse in the field, and said should he find out who had done it he would “kill them by pulling out their tendons and tearing off their skin”. That night, when Ke's father was watching TV at home, several people of Kejiawan came to him to “complain”, telling him about the nasty things his son had said during the day, in particular, that the son had threated to “beat his father to death”. They said to the older Ke, “Your son said he was going to pull out your tendons and tear off your skin, because you were partial toward Kejiawan and did not try to defend his mother-in-law.” In Ke’s eyes, these people purposely distorted the truth. He explained that he say nasty things but none of it wa directed at his father.

However, the problem was that, when Ke was spewing nasty things in the field, he didn’t name names, leaving room for those who came to his father to “complain” by twisting the facts.

Of course, Ke’s father was angry after hearing all of this. The next morning, he went to his two othersons to air his grievances, saying “Your older brother was going to kill me. What do you say to this?” The two sons said, “Father, just go to his home to fight with him. If he dared to hit you, you threaten to kill yourself in his home.” Beside himself with rage, the father therefore went to Ke’s home and confronted him, “Yesterday someone told me that you were going to kill me by pulling out my tendons and tearing off my skin. Now here I am. Let me see how you are going to do it.” Ke said he was not targeting him. However, the father became even more infuriated by his son’s denial and went forward to beat Ke. “I am going to kill you first!”, said the father, running to his son and grabbed his neck. “Seriously?”, Ke asked. “Of course, I am serious! And I am going to beat you, you unfilial bastard standing with your mother-in-law!” In the kerfuffle, Ke kicked his father’s lower body and then the two tored into each other. People tried to break up the fight. Having been kicked by his son, the father felt mortified. He ran back home, grabbed a bottle of pesticides, and started drinking from it while running back to his son’s home. By the time spectators rushed him to the hospital, it was too late, he died on the way.

After the father’s death, *darenming* was launched for him within his family. Heads of several his family branches called up members of every family branch to have a discussion. They agreed that: Ke, the disobedient son, killed his father, and he must be buried alive with his deceased father. Of course, in practice, it was impossible for Ke to be buried. Instead, as an alternative, he would be fiercely beaten.

“Members of family branches as well as the production brigades all came. It cost me half a pig to treat them. What’s worse, each of them deliberately came here with a wreath and I had to pay for the wreaths. They just want to punish me.” Ke said. “My brothers also wrangled over with me, insisting that I was the one who killed father. I confronted them by asking whether one of them really saw me beating father to death. He was my father. How could I possibly do that?” Yet, compared with Ke’s brothers, members of family branches were obviously more difficult to deal with. “A meeting held by family branch members concluded that it was I who beat my father. They threatened to mobilize the whole village to teach me a good lesson.” “The meeting was held just at my home. Each family branch sent a male member to scold me.” “Actually, the meeting itself was intimidating enough. At the

beginning of the meeting, I intended to defend myself. But they never gave me any chance to speak and said if I didn't admit my mistake, they would do the utmost to torture me!" Ke further added, "In those years, I was just like landlords, rich farmers, counter revolutionaries and rightists. I was not allowed to voice my opinions. Once I did, people would say I had no right to speak since I killed my father. They picked on me, here and there. In particular, I found myself unable to argue with others. Once I did, people would bring the matter up. So, I had to keep myself in low key, trying to avoid any trouble with anyone. I tried to avoid greeting people on the street but when I found there's no way to escape, I did it as normal. I was lucky because I was a carpenter. Out of home all day long, I had little interaction with people, hence not much rebuke by them." "My uncle, for example. He always targeted me with my father's death. He was a mason. And because I was a carpenter, we met each other quite often when we worked outside the village. When he drank, he would say that I pushed my father to death and that it was impossible to prove myself innocent. Later, his mother died, also by taking pesticides. He no longer argued with me over my father's death. Once he brought this up, I would say a few words about his mother's death in retort, which left him with nothing to say. Then gradually, people also forgot about this and no longer talked about it."

Cases of vengeful suicide as a punishment among the elderly are few, which is essentially associated to the less prominent suicide phenomenon of the elderly in a tight-knit society. However, once this type of suicide does occur among the elderly, it could literally constitute a strong deterrent to the children who are really unfilial to their parents.

vengeful suicide as a threat, holding the second place among the empirical types of vengeful suicide, is milder than vengeful suicide as a punishment in terms of intensity and severity and some of which are even quite dramatic, as shown in Case 2.3. However, chances are it could transition to vengeful suicide as a punishment due to the mishandling of the threatening content by people who are threatened or the underestimating of the poison by those who mean only to threaten. Certainly, it is not difficult to judge whether the suicide actor means to threaten or punish people, except for few cases.

**Case 2.3**

In the early 1990s, Yang Qi's wife in Yangjiawan, Feng Village attempted suicide by taking pesticides. Addicted to gambling, Yang Qi had been threatened many times by his wife who had said that she would kill herself with pesticides if she found him gambling again. And the husband had promised his wife multiple times that he would never gamble again. There was an iron mine on the mountain in Feng Village. Yang worked there during the day and came back home for dinner and sleep at night. However, every time during work, the husband would quickly finish the assigned task and then find a concealed place to play cards with his friends. What's more, by showing himself in front of his wife on the dot after work, the wife mistakenly thought he did give up gambling and worked very hard in the mine. However, he once failed to go back home on time for he had got drunk while drinking with friends. The wife therefore looked for him in the mine, only to be told by workers on duty that he had already gone back. This made the wife begin to wonder if he was gambling in some secret place. Searching a lot, she finally found him. The wife didn't say anything but gave him an irritable glare. Seeing he didn't respond, she uttered a few curse words and went back home alone. "I was thinking that I would be so embarrassed in front of my friends if I had stopped the game and gone back with my wife. So, I continued to play, and planned to say a few kind words to soothe her." Yang said. Back home, the wife still couldn't make herself calm down. The more she thought that his husband might have been gambling without her knowledge, the more she became overwhelmed by anger. "I was thinking that since he had been caught gambling by me, he should have stopped the game. If I didn't do something about it, he would not take me seriously. So, I took pesticides, but only a little of it. Then I had my child to tell the neighbor that I took pesticides because my husband still hung on to gambling." The wife, who was sitting aside, added while I was interviewing Yang. With the timely help of the neighbor and others who took Yang's wife to the hospital, she was brought

back to life. “When I got to the hospital, though she was already fine, I still was frightened to death. After that for nearly 10 years, I didn’t dare to play cards. Now when I think about it, I think she was stupid then. It’s actually no big deal. Now she herself also play cards.” Yang said.

Another empirical type of vengeful suicide is for defense against slander which only occurred once in a tight-knit society. It is mainly a suicide bid chosen by suicides in the face of some injustices such as “ being wronged” or “being slandered” that actually do exist or do not exist at all. The purpose, on the one hand, is to wash out the stain, and on the other hand, retaliate against those who wronged or slandered them.

In essence, the aim of committing vengeful suicide is to get relief by means of suicide when suicide actors experience predicaments (namely, various direct reasons that lead to suicide). Yet, whether this relief can be achieved is closely related to a strong local regulatory control system in place. Only when the system is tough and complete, suicide actors living within it can have a strong expectation of their actions. It can be said that tight-knit society basically has a relatively complete but paradoxical regulatory control system in place similar to folk law (customary law) or, in specific, folk law on suicide (customary law on suicide).

From the cases mentioned above, we know that people who died by suicide were treated in an extremely stern manner. With the cases and my extensive investigation in fieldwork, we can sum up the key points of the regulatory control system for suicide in a tight-knit society as follows.

In the first place, regulatory control on people who died by suicide includes the following four points:

First, their bodies are not allowed into rooms, especially the central room, but only to be put in the open space outside the room. Second, offerings are not allowed to be made to redeem lost souls from hell for them. Third, their bodies cannot be buried on the hill for ancestral graves, but only on the hill specially for burying abnormal deaths. Fourth, when the bodies are buried, the elders in the village need to practice rites behind the bodies to expel the ghosts out of the village. Unwritten as they are, these four rules are quite rigid, aimed at shaping the suicides into wandering and evil ghosts, and expelling them from their families. In this way, their souls could not be resettled, and more suicide deaths would not occur because of the ghosts haunting the village.

In the second place, the treatment of those who caused suicide deaths or those involved is also extremely strict.

Generally speaking, the roles mainly related to suicide deaths are husband, wife, father-in-law, mother-in-law, son and daughter-in-law. Although cases of suicide death involving neighbors do exist, they are still a minority on the whole. Cases of vengeful suicide involving couples, intergenerational family members and a mix of them account for nearly four fifths of all cases of vengeful suicide. Therefore, for those who commit suicide but not due to suffering serious diseases, the families of the deceased would conduct *darenming*. To put it in an extreme way, the so-called “*darenming*” means “one life for another, that is, the person directly responsible for the suicide death is executed through family law enforcement to avenge the victim”. The most common practice of “*darenming*” is to demand the directly responsible person lay at the bottom of the coffin for the dead, that is, to be buried alive with the dead. Since this draconian execution authority is not enshrined in the national law, in this miniature civil society as a tight-knit society, *darenming* often begins with a demand for burial of the directly responsible with the dead, but ends with the following less demanding requests instead. First, it is required that the funeral affairs should be managed ceremoniously. For normal deaths, funeral affairs should be finished within one day. Yet, for suicide deaths, it’s two days or even longer. Second, in the process of conducting funeral affairs, the person directly responsible for the death is required to put on mourning apparel for the dead and carry the spirit tablet. Third, the requirement for the coffin is extremely high, generally starting with the most superior kind of “Duiqiang Yuanhua” and ending with the less superior kind of “Yuanhua”. Fourth, how the dead is dressed is paid extremely high

attention to. Seven or more layers of shrouds made of silks and satins must be clothed for the dead, while normally, one or two layers are just enough. Fifth, it is required to bury the body on hills for ancestral graves. Sixth, the body must be allowed into the house for parade, and then parked in the main room. Of these six requirements, the second, fifth and sixth are the most severe. Therefore, in the actual process of *darenming*, these three are often the sticking points. In retrospect, the above six requirements are almost fully reflected after the death of Liu Ying in Case 2.1.

The reason why we say that this regulatory control system is similar to a set of folk laws on suicide is that we think its connotation basically conforms to the characteristics of folk laws. From this perspective, a series of unwritten but very rigid regulations on the treatment of suicides themselves as well as those directly responsible for suicide deaths, can be regarded as the set of folk laws used in a tight-knit society to deal with suicide events. This set of folk laws has two aspects of regulation: one on suicides themselves, and the other on people directly related to suicide deaths. Those who commit suicide commit crime. As a result, they will be faced with a series of punishments by folk laws after death. Those punishments mainly focus on the treatment of the body and the spirit attached to the body. In a tight-knit society with strong ancestor worship and concept of family, the rules of not allowing the body to be buried on the hill for ancestral graves and not allowing it to be carried into rooms are really the most severe punishment. It is equivalent to expelling the dead from the ancestral memorial tablets and from the spiritual community of “home”. While the rule that offerings are not allowed to be made for suicides to redeem their lost souls is in essence aimed at expelling the souls so as to make them become wandering ghosts and unable to find the next replacement (the ghost of the next suicide death). For people in a tight-knit society who believe that ghosts and gods do exist, this is also extremely severe. Therefore, this punishment system exerts regulation on suicides from two levels: “body-corpse” and “spirit-soul”.

It can be said that the folk law system composed of those punishments of suicides in a tight-knit society is relatively complete. In the wake of suicide deaths of married young women in a tight-knit society, *darenming* practices were staged almost in every case. As we have said earlier, there were at least 30 large-scale *darenming* incidents according to incomplete statistics. In this tight-knit society, *darenming* substantially helps define the crime committed by those directly liable for the suicide death. Simply put, the crime amounts to intentional homicide described in the national law. The requirement that the person directly responsible should be buried at the bottom of the coffin with the dead is tantamount to directly sentencing the person to “death penalty” in light of folk laws. The requirement to carry the body into the house for parade and park it in the main room is aimed at letting the ghost of the deceased find the next replacement in the region, which, in other words, means the people alive are given “death penalty” for causing the suicide death. Thus, in the aftermath of the suicide death, the family the dead belongs to would declare that the directly responsible person such as mother-in-law, father-in-law or husband “forced her to death” (the meaning of which in folk society almost similar to that of intentional homicide), hence the folk logic of “one life for one life” displayed in a tight-knit society in the form of *darenming*. In this sense, we are able to understand the practices of *darenming* in Case 2.1 and Case 2.2 which are backed by this tough set of folk laws.

Thus, we can find that whether it is the person who died by suicide or the responsible person directly related to the suicide death, once the suicide accident occurs, both parties will be punished by the folk laws in a tight-knit society. Although the “death penalty” cannot be eventually fully achieved through *darenming*, the thought of other punishments of the people alive, especially the huge sensation caused by *darenming* itself, are liable to produce afraid feelings. For suicides, although some of their “benefits” may be claimed through intense episodes of *darenming*, they still face the possibility to be expelled from clans and families and their souls may become wandering ghosts as a result. Able to impose relatively severe but incomplete punishments, this set of folk laws still serves as a deterrent both to

people who may easily resort to suicide, and to those having the intention to trigger suicide. In this sense, this folk law system can restrain suicide to a certain extent.

However, given the absence of the national law on suicide in the whole society, it is absent, too, in a tight-knit society. The national law neither defines whether suicide is a crime, nor explains whether suicide is one of the fundamental human rights. Meanwhile, specific legal rights and accountabilities for the responsible persons related to suicide are not specified in the national law. For example, in the context of suicide of a daughter-in-law resulting from a quarrel between her and her mother-in-law, the national law does not clarify the legal responsibility that the mother-in-law should bear, nor what kind of accountability the deceased should be held for the impact on the village after her suicide death, or the relief that can be obtained from the village or the country. The ambiguity and inaction of the national law on suicide provide a vague space for people to explain and deal with suicide deaths.

In the above cases of suicide in a tight-knit society, we can see the role of the state (embodied by the police). For example, in Case 2.1, after Liu Ying's death, the police forces on both sides were deployed, but only treated *darenming* as a general public security incident. The aim was maintaining public security and preventing clan fighting and other violent crimes "derived" from the suicide. In the treatment of the dead and those related to the death, the state in fact, adopted the basic rules conforming to the folk laws. For example, it didn't not prevent people of Liujiawan (Liu Ying's family) from smashing things, nor did it prevent people of Wangjiawan (the family of the person directly responsible for the suicide death) from handling the body in their way. Therefore, the role of the state is essentially a passive response to the rules and needs of the folk laws on suicide.

However, the folk laws are not perfect after all. From the perspective of the folk laws on suicide in a tight-knit society, the rule setting is actually full of contradictions and conflicts. On the one hand, the treatment of the dead is nothing short of declaring the suicide bid as a "crime" and even "felony". On the other hand, *darenming* is included in the same set of folk laws to claim the rights for the dead, from the perspective of which, the folk laws actually define suicide as "homicide". In this way, the suicide death actually has two obviously contradictory aspects: "suicide" and "homicide". Therefore, in the absence of the national law on suicide, various roles or clans related to the dead make conflicting judgments based on their relationship with the dead. It is these contradictory judgments that constitute the basis for the suicide to become an event, making it a great sensation within a tight-knit society.

Take suicide committed by married young women as an example. Viewing the suicide as a "crime" that harms the family and the village according to the existing rules of the folk laws, the husband's family makes a series of decisions to "expel" the dead, so that her soul cannot be resettled. While the wife's family regards the suicide as a kind of "homicide" by members of the husband's family who "forced the wife to death". Therefore, the requirements that the body shall be carried into the main room for parade and be buried on the hill for ancestral graves are essentially made to resettle the soul of the dead, apart from other insulting treatment of those directly responsible for the suicide death that is equivalent to special sanctions based on the folk laws. The contradictory and conflicting folk laws have its own logical self-consistency and legitimacy within a tight-knit society. However, how should the national law respond to the rules established within the folk laws? What arrangements should the national law make for special events such as suicide?

In fact, it is the aphasia and inaction of the national law on suicide that help trigger clan fighting in the wake of suicide events under this contradictory and conflicting folk law system. Moreover, for the folk law enforcement method of *darenming* in particular, the national law, because of its own aphasia, tend to acquiesce in the legitimacy of the existence of *darenming* to a certain extent. However, it is precisely because of this that it is extremely easy for married young women (including all other suicide actors who resort to vengeful suicide) to choose suicide as an extreme way to end their lives after encountering conflicts with the roles related to their husbands' families, so as to obtain the relief from the folk laws

such as *darenming* and achieve the purpose of punishment. Actually, from a materialist point of view, the relief is meaningless for the dead. However, as pointed out in the author's previous research (Liu and Wang 2010), it is exactly because of ancestor worship and beliefs in ghosts and gods in a tight-knit society that every individual living in it can divide his or her life into two parts: "present" and "post-death". Every "present self" is witnessing the social practice of *darenming* in the aftermath of suicide deaths in their living space. Therefore, they can actually imagine that their "post-death selves" can gain the relief from folk law enforcement as they have witnessed as "present selves". From this point of view, this folk law system actually aggravates the potential possibility of suicide in the region where tight-knit society is located, which is the exact internal mechanism that explains why vengeful suicide so extensively exists in this type of society. Vengeful suicide as a punishment, as a threat and for defense against slander are mainly different in degree, with their internal logic being the same.

From the perspective of change of suicide rate, it is necessary for us to continue to investigate the basic mechanism of it.

Before the early 1980s, because of the powerful people's commune system, the local regulatory control system in a tight-knit society was temporarily suppressed, unable to play a powerful role outside the national legal system (laws in a broad sense, including national policies and macro-systems, etc.). Without the foundation laid by the local regulatory control system that prompts the occurrence of vengeful suicide, the overall suicide rate, therefore, in a tight-knit society was kept at a low level, as proved by the extremely low suicide rate recorded during the 30 years before the 1980s.

Given the lack of textual materials, we are not able to study the distribution of the suicide rate 60 years ago with oral recollections only. Therefore, it is difficult for us to judge whether the suicide rate in a tight-knit society before 1949 was higher or lower than that in the present. Because the local regulatory control system relatively stable, we can rely on recollections or some textual materials to make some brief analysis, though. Based on the memories of the elderly in a tight-knit society represented by Feng, Cha and Zhao Village, we can judge that the suicide phenomena before 1949 coexisted with the *darenming* practices. More often than not, episodes of *darenming* as in Case 2.1 occurred after married young women killed themselves by suicide.

According to some older people, women's suicide at that time often triggered large-scale fighting between two or even more families. Because the stories took place so long ago that some details have faded from the memories. However, through some local folk songs, we can gain an insight into them. For instance, the "Buckwheat in blossom" which goes like this: "Buckwheat is in full blossom, while it is me who is grinding round and round. As soon as I sit down to take a breath, my father-in-law would raise a bar to hit me and mother-in-law slap in my face at first sight. Without eating anything for three days, I do not know what it is like to be hungry. Wiping away tears, I am desperate to go back to my parents' home. But my mother says I shouldn't come. My husband's family should bury me if they beat me to death. They must draft the mourning list in white paper, and erect the scarlet-letter spirit tablet. The mother-in-law must mourn deeply wearing gunny garment and the husband must kneel before the catafalque." Describing a typical scene before liberation (i.e. before 1949), this ballad allows us to take a glance at the general picture of *darenming* at that time from the wife's family's "imagination" after the wife's suicide death. The first few sentences describe the intergenerational conflict as the direct cause of suicide or homicide. While the next sentence of "My husband's family should bury me if they beat me to death" indicates, to a large degree, that the wife's family may demand the dead be buried along with the husband's family's ancestral graves as a way of punishment. In some sense, the line "They must draft the mourning list in white paper, and erect the scarlet-letter spirit tablet" reflects the wife's family's requirement that the dead wife shall be mourned in elaborate services. "The mother-in-law must mourn deeply wearing gunny garment and the husband must kneel before the catafalque" is no different from the series of requirements targeted at Liu Ying's mother-in-law and her husband in Case 2.1. Therefore, it is conceivable that the

phenomenon of *darenming* must have existed before liberation. Further, we have reason to speculate that the suicide problem, especially that of young women, was more serious in the period before liberation, so the suicide rate should not be too low.

Before 1949, the suicide of the elderly went hand in hand with intra-clan *darenming* practices as in Case 2.2, but at a higher degree of severity. For instance, a case of suicide death in which the father committed suicide due to an altercation with his son. Clan members were sent to arrest the son and tie him with a rope. On the day the dead father was buried, people demanded the son lay at the bottom of his father's coffin and be buried alive. First, the son was positioned horizontally a few meters away from his father's grave. Then, people rolled his body with their feet and hands towards the edge of the grave until the son begged for mercy. After burying the father, they dragged the son to the ancestral hall, taking off his lower clothes, letting him lie prone on the ground, and spanking him with a plank. This kind of scene is, more or less, reflected in the punishment of Ke in Case 2.2, though the severity of the latter is far less great than the level before liberation.

During the 20 years from the early 1980s to the middle and late 1990s, the widespread occurrence of vengeful suicide, especially among married young women, drastically raised the overall suicide rate in a tight-knit society. The emergence of this suicide wave, from a macro perspective, originated from the disintegration of the people's commune system, thus temporarily restoring the role of the local regulatory control system which was forcibly suppressed by the state. The effect of the renewed system on the first or the first few cases of vengeful suicide might be "accidental", however, given that the system became an inevitability temporarily, suicide was no longer a sudden or accidental event but gradually became regular or inevitable.

Meanwhile, when the local regulatory control system was restored and put into effect temporarily due to the absence of the national regulatory control system after the disintegration of the people's commune system, the later, however, was also gradually re-exerting its control on local areas. And compared with the previous situation, the national regulatory control system after the 1980s played its role even more in the advancement of the national law with more distinctive modern features. Take *darenming*, the highly impactful local regulatory control system for suicide, as an example. After the late 1990s, it began to decline seriously. After 2000, with the drastic drop of suicide rate of young women, especially married young women, it tended to disappear. The reason is that the national law began to review its control and regulation on various disputes after suicide deaths, allowing relief secured for the property loss and personal injury caused by *darenming* from the national law. Therefore, for the suicide of married young women like Liu Ying in Case 2.1, if they were living in the period after 2000, their family members, though dubious about the death, could only report to the police, and were not able to mobilize the whole family to conduct *darenming* as in the 1980s and 1990s, because any unauthorized destruction, such as what Wang Dingfu's family experienced in Case 2.1, might constitute a criminal offence.

Yet, as we have discussed earlier, the intervention of the national law on suicide itself was virtually absent. Of China's penal provisions, there was no legal provision on suicide. Therefore, even if people reported the suicide case, the responsible people related to it could not be penalized, unless there was sufficient evidence to prove that the suicide death was caused by homicide. As a result, in a tight-knit society, for any cases of suicide, especially of vengeful suicide since 2000, to get relief from the local regulatory control system as before was hard, so was getting relief from the system on the national level. Hence, there was no ground laid by regulatory control for the emergence of vengeful suicide. What's more, when people were experiencing predicaments, such as domestic violence, extramarital affairs or unfilial children, they would not easily seek suicide as a way to retaliate, but resorted to legal assistance more. For example, those who experienced domestic violence or extramarital affairs could sue for divorce, and those who had unfilial children could take their children to court. These changes were in essence caused by the continuous infiltration of social modernity into tight-knit society. It was in the context of

these changes that the suicide rate in a tight-knit society dropped significantly since 2000 due to the decline in the suicide rate among young women.

## 4.2 Mechanism of Other Suicide Types

As I have mentioned before, vengeful suicide is the main type of suicide in a tight-knit society. And compared with other social types, altruistic suicide is relatively prominent in this social type. Among the three empirical types of altruistic suicide, altruistic suicide for martyrdom has the strongest purpose. See Case 2.4.

**Case 2.4**

In his early 60s, Liu Yong, in Liuwan, Zhao Village, killed himself by taking pesticides in 2008. Raising two sons and one daughter, his wife died very early. The daughter was married. The elder son died of illness several years earlier, and his wife therefore returned to her family in Sichuan since after. In the first half of 2008, the younger son who was a living-in son-in-law in Jiangxi called the father and said that he was seriously ill and that was close to death. After hearing the sad news, Liu Yong told others that he didn't want the white-haired himself to see the black-haired son to die before him. If only he could die ahead so that his younger son could live longer. Therefore, he committed suicide by drinking pesticides. A few months later, still, his younger son was snatched away by death, anyway.

Altruistic suicide for martyrdom occurs mainly among the elderly in a tight-knit society in particular where people believe in ghosts and gods. In addition to Case 2.4 in which the father committed suicide and died because of his worry about his son's illness, another typical example is that some older people (such as those over 90 years old) took the initiative to commit suicide, considering that their long lives might "deprive" their children and grandchildren of the right to live longer. When their children and grandchildren came across difficulties or suffered misfortunes, it was easier for the elderly to make such decisions. Slightly less altruistic than altruistic suicide for martyrdom is altruistic suicide for assumption of responsibility in which case people would resort to suicide death in order to avoid making people close to them take responsibility. See Case 2.5.

**Case 2.5**

Liu Xi, an elderly woman in her 60s in Wangjiawan, Feng Village, committed suicide in the late 1990s. Wang Fu, her son, had sexual relations with his neighbor, Ke Yingzi's wife. Once, working in the fields, Ke suddenly realized he forgot something, so he went home to get it. Yet, when he arrived, he saw through the window Wang Fu and his wife were in bed having sex. Infuriated, he, outside the room, began to lambaste the two inside. Alarmed, Wang Fu quickly got up and got dressed in a rush and stormed out of the door. The moment he was at the doorstep, Wang Fu was given a sound beating by Ke. Instead of fighting back, Wang quickly fled home.

Ke didn't follow Wang to his home but rushed into the room to beat his wife. Seeing her son running into home, disheveled and blushing, and then hearing the noise of fighting next door, Liu Xi understood everything. What's more, according to the villagers, she should have already known about her son's sexual affair with Ke's wife. Liu Xi knew that his son would have to bear very serious consequences after the affair was revealed. In Feng Village, there were always two sets of rules for extramarital affairs. First, if the person who was betrayed didn't know, nothing could happen. Even if other people knew the affair, they wouldn't reveal it. If they did, people who were thought to be cheating might go to the home of the person who revealed it to commit suicide by drinking pesticides to show innocence (similar to the vengeful suicide for defense against slander we have mentioned earlier). Therefore, although extramarital affairs were common in Feng Village, people kept silent. Second, once the person who was betrayed found the affair himself, he had two methods to deal with it. One was to "keep his grievances to himself" first, and then wait for an opportunity to have sex with a member (mainly the wife) of the family which left him cuckolded to wreak vengeance. In this way, the betrayed felt no longer "at a disadvantaged position". The other

method was to make the affair a sensation by drawing public attention to it. The affair would evolve into a life-and death matter with the cheating (one or both of them) having to pay the price. Fierce physical violence (a must) and monetary compensation were commonly seen.

Ke had four brothers and many cousins, while Liu's son was on his own. Therefore, she knew if she didn't do something, her son would definitely "suffer". As expected, after Ke beat his wife, he led all his brothers and cousins to Wang Fu's home, foaming with rage. They planned to smash his home to pieces first, give him a sound beating, and then make him pay for Ke's loss. Liu, overwhelmed by the tension, picked up a bottle of pesticides on the table and guzzled it. Finishing the pesticides, she said, "Let me die for my son. Please let him go." Then she died.

Originally aggressive, Ke and his brothers and cousins, were shocked by Liu's sudden suicide bid. They, who should have been totally justified for what they did, panicked instead and ran into the home to save Liu. Wang, who was hiding in the room, knew something got wrong when he heard the noise outside and his mother's words. Therefore, he ran out of the room, regardless of the risk of being beaten. As soon as he saw the irretrievable scene, he cried, holding his mother in arms, while saying that Ke's family must pay for his mother's lost life because it was they that forced his mother to death. Saddened by the obituary notice, Liu's family sent hundreds of people to conduct *darenming*, demanding Liu's body be buried in Ke's main room. At this time, the family branches to which Wang and Ke belonged both intervened. In terms of strength, given that the incident took place only within the village, the Ke family was dwarfed by the combination of the Wang family and Liu family. Therefore, unlike in Case 2.1 in which all family branches, regardless of surnames were involved, in this case, other family branches would try their best to remain neutral as much as they could. In the dispute, the Ke family insisted that Wang did wrong first, and thought that Liu was the culprit for his mother's death. Anger vented, the Liu family and Wang family reviewed and analyzed the incident and also felt that Wang should indeed be held accountable. However, the Liu family believed that, how to deal with Wang was a matter between the Wang family and Ke family, while Liu's death, apart from directly related to the Wang family, was also a matter between the Liu family and Ke family. The Ke family only need to hold the Wang family accountable for "Da Pi Ban" ("extramarital sexual relations" in local dialect, describing the naked skin contact between men and women), but the Ke family owed the Liu family a human life. *darenming* changed from original "violent fighting" to "negotiations". The heads of the three family branches which belonged to three different clans sat down to discuss and finally ended the issue symbolically with Ke's family writing an "IOU" to Liu's family, which said: "Ke's family owes Liu's family a life".

Different from the above two types of altruistic suicide, "altruistic suicide for burden alleviation" with a relatively lower degree of altruism is more common in real life. Generally, it is an altruistic action by people in order not to drag down their relatives after suffering from physical and mental illness or pain. Because it is common, sometimes this suicide type is close to "egoistic suicide to end suffering" at the boundary. When the altruistic motive is not very obvious, the former might tend to transition to the latter. On the contrary, the boundary between altruistic suicide for martyrdom and altruistic suicide for assumption of responsibility is very clear. See Case 2.6 for altruistic suicide for burden alleviation.

**Case 2.6**

Du Lin, who was over 70 years old in Dujiawan, Feng Village, committed suicide by drinking pesticides in the late 1990s. Du Lin had four sons and two daughters. Elderly as he was, Du was very hardworking. Besides taking care of his own farm work and housework, he often helped his four sons with their farm work. In his later years, Du became seriously ill and completely lost his ability to work. His four sons took turns to support him by living with him. This situation upset Du who thought he was useless. "He might think that not only could he no longer do anything for his sons, but his illness cost their money. In order to reduce the burden on his sons, he ended his life. As far as I know, I guess he mainly worried about

costing his sons too much money to treat his illness." said a cousin who belonged to the same family branch as Du.

In the three villages of tight-knit society, there were a total of three cases of altruistic suicide for burden alleviation, all of which occurred before 2000, and there were another two cases occurring in the 1980s. In addition, there were two cases of altruistic suicide for martyrdom and two cases of altruistic suicide for assumption of responsibility, with each type recording one case in the 1980s and since 2000 respectively.

Altruistic suicide stems from a high sense of responsibility to relatives, while egoistic suicide is its opposite. However, in a tight-knit society, there is one exception among the empirical types of egoistic suicide. It is "egoistic suicide to evade" which also originates from a high sense of responsibility to relatives based on blood connection. The responsibility, passive or active, can become so heavy that people get pushed towards the opposite side. That is, they tend to escape from this responsibility, as shown in Case 2.7. In addition to being relatively prominent in a tight-knit society featuring strong blood connection, egoistic suicide to evade also has a quite strong presence in a loose-knit society described in the third chapter.

**Case 2.7**

Mrs. Du, a 30-year-old from Dujiawan, Feng Village, committed suicide by taking pesticides in early July 2009. She was very hardworking, doing housework as well as taking care of many other things. Every night, she went out with her husband to catch snakes, tortoises, soft-shelled turtles etc. During the day, they toiled in rented fields. The month of July was a busy farming period, during which the couple couldn't be too busy. Feeling too stressed to bear, the wife revealed to her husband multiple times that she wanted to drink pesticides and die, but each time she also said paradoxically that for the sake of the family, she couldn't kill herself. One day near noon, under the scorching sun, the couple worked in the fields, and the wife once again expressed her intention of suicide to her husband. Annoyed, her husband quarreled with her, letting her help herself if she wanted to take pesticides and criticized her as being always talking, never doing. As a result, the wife picked up the pesticides bottle in the fields and guzzled it on the spot. By the time the husband grabbed the bottle, she had already drunk a third in one breath. It was too late. He hurriedly called some people to send his wife to the hospital for emergency treatment. While asking her to hold on, he said with great guilt that he was just saying angry words and hadn't expected that she would really take pesticides. The wife said that she felt too tired and really wanted to kill herself long ago. Because of the hot weather, compounded by the bumpy road all the way, she died from poisoning before reaching the hospital.

Compared with the noticeable presence of altruistic suicide for burden alleviation, egoistic suicide to end suffering is less common in a tight-knit society. Yet, scattered cases of egoistic suicide to vent anger are still seen in this social type. See Case 2.8.

**Case 2.8**

A 30-year-old young man in Liuwan, Zhao Village, ended his life by drinking rat poison after arguing with his mother in 2005. The man had two sons, and the younger son was just a month old. The reason behind the tragedy was simple. The man's mother's light bulb burned out, so he was asked to help change it. Watching a TV series at that time, the son sat still and didn't respond to his mother's request, which incurred the mother's scolding. He talked a few words back. The mother, fuming with anger, said, "You dead bastard, why don't you go kill yourself?" However, the son should suddenly get up from his chair, run into the room, pick up a bottle of rat poison and swallow it all. Then he ran over and sat in the chair, saying to his wife that "I took the rat poison. Soon I will die." The man died on the way to the hospital. His mother cried miserably after his death, really puzzled at why his son would take poison after scolding him a few words while at ordinary times nothing unusual would happen at all.

Though being not a major suicide type in a tight-knit society, egoistic suicide to vent anger accounts for a certain proportion. In fact, this type of suicide might exist in all social types. Given its strong impulsive feature, it might be related to the psychological factors of suicides, and might not have strong social and cultural significance behind it.

The last basic type of suicide is suicide of despair. in a Tight-knit Society, suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems and value reasons take up a certain proportion, while despair suicide for survival reasons is less common. See Cases 2.9 and 2.10.

**Case 2.9**

Du Sen, a 28-year-old from Dujiawan, Feng Village, committed suicide by drinking pesticides in 1996. Du Sen's father died when he was young, so he lived alone with his mother. In the eyes of the villagers, he was "lazy". By the age of 28, Du still couldn't find himself a wife. According to the local experience, it was actually very difficult for a person like Du to get married, which meant that he would probably be single all his life. Du was also quite upset about this. When he was idling about in the village, he often revealed to the villagers that his life was boring. The villagers sometimes regarded his talk as jokes, even provoking him by saying that if he really saw no point in living, why not end his life. Du then said seriously that he really wanted to die, because he felt that he might not be able to have a wife in his whole life and continue the family line for his dead father. It was better for him to end his life early than die alone when he became elderly. On the eve of Spring Festival in 1996, Du committed suicide at home. When his mother called him to get up for breakfast, he was found dead for quite a couple hours.

**Case 2.10**

In 1990, Wang Guiyun, from Wangjiawan, Feng Village, killed herself by taking pesticides at the age of 19. When in high school, she fell in love with a classmate surnamed Wang whom she wanted to marry after graduation. Yet, the union was resolutely opposed by her parents because of the two sharing the same surname, which was not allowed in Wangjiawan. Citing that there hadn't been any case of isonymous marriage since their ancestor took root more than 400 years ago, the parents didn't allow their daughter to break the rule and thus be criticized by the villagers. Wang told her parents that if she couldn't marry her classmate, she would rather die. Scolded as a shameless bitch by her parents, she was told that even if she died, she still couldn't marry someone with the same surname. As a consequence, the girl committed suicide by taking pesticides.

Cases 2.9 is a case of suicide of despair over value. A hallmark in a tight-knit society, strong clan consciousness is often manifested in people's valued idea of carrying on the family line. The idea can be said to be an ontological value for people to settle down and secure a place in life (He 2008). From the perspective of inevitability, when this ontological value is difficult to be realized, the basis for people's legal existence no longer exists. From the perspective of contingency, a person who accidentally encounters a misfortune may choose suicide. In a manner of speaking, Du Sen's death derives from suicide of despair over value. Similarly, there are also two cases in which elderly people committed suicide one hour before they were cremated. Their suicide can also be classified as suicide of despair over value, because they, believing that souls existed after death, deemed cremation as a destructive force to break the whole set of value system with ancestor worship as the core. They knew that once the cremation was enforced, there was no hope for them to be buried in the ground.

Case 2.10 is a case of suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems, which was very common among unmarried young women in the1980s and early 1990s. Among the parents of those unmarried young women, some of them opposed their daughters' association with their true lovers and even marriage, citing various reasons, such as economic poverty, remote areas, unsatisfactory appearance, inability to make a living, etc. Some arbitrarily made arrangements for their daughters' marriage and romantic

relationship with others, forcing the young girls to marry someone they didn't love. In the face of unmet emotional needs, some of these young girls chose to put up with the life, while others resorted to suicide. Suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems was found not only in unmarried young women, but also in the elderly and married women. The elderly, who usually had high emotional expectations of their children, committed suicide in despair, when their expectations were not met. For example, in the three villages of tight-knit society, two elderly women both committed suicide during the Dragon Boat Festival just because their daughters-in-law gave them not completely steamed buns to eat. Not a big deal in others' eyes, the matter was deemed as quite serious by the two seniors. What they really cared about was not the specific "thing" of the "steamed buns", but the "emotional significance" of respecting and loving the elderly attached to the "steamed buns". For married women, suicide of despair for emotional reasons mainly occurred while responding to their husbands' extramarital affairs with others. Some of them might take threatening vengeful suicide action to get their husbands back to home. In an extreme manner, some might seek vengeful suicide as a punishment at the cost of their lives to penalize their husbands. While some might go to another extreme by killing themselves in emotional despair. Still, vengeful suicide had a predominant presence among married women, and despair suicide over marriage and relationship problems didn't enter the mainstream of married women's suicide in a tight-knit society.

Up to this point, I have devoted a major section of the book to showing the general picture of the other three basic types of suicide (altruistic suicide, egoistic suicide and suicide of despair) and their respective empirical types in a tight-knit society. It is necessary for us to go further by having a discussion about them next and make an analysis.

First of all, in terms of the classification of ideal types of suicide, we can further discover the reasonability of the classification by in-order-to motive in a Chinese context. We know that Durkheim (1996) divided suicide types by cause-motivation, which is not without its merits from the perspective of hypothesis. However, in empirical research, Durkheim's approach of classification is rather difficult to be applied. Judged from the above-mentioned cases of suicide only, we find the variety of cause-motivations. Almost every suicide case has its own unique direct cause. As far as the direct cause-motivation of altruistic suicide is concerned, it ranges from juniors' suffering from illness or accidental death, seniors' worry about their long lives having a fatal impact on juniors, seniors' illness inflicting financial damage to juniors, to seniors' taking responsibility for juniors' mistakes. Likewise, direct cause-motivations can be identified in other basic types of suicide and their empirical types. It is due to the complexity of the suicide phenomenon as well as the principle of conciseness needed in theoretical framework construction that I choose not to adopt Durkheim's approach but to classify suicide types from the perspective of in-order-to motive. The empirical facts described above have proven that this method of "going against Durkheim's approach" is reasonable.

Secondly, let's look at how these suicide types are generated.

For altruistic suicide, its generation mechanism lies in the high sense of responsibility of people who committed suicide to other members with blood relationship, with the strong blood connection within a tight-knit society as a more profound factor. The most central relationship range derives from blood connection is between parents and offspring, followed by relationship between at least four to five generations or even more, to which both direct and collateral lines can extend. Take altruistic suicide for martyrdom as an example. Elder people make altruistic suicide choices not only for their offspring. When some of their grandchildren and even great-grandchildren encounter predicaments, especially such as abnormal deaths or deaths caused by diseases, they would think about whether their longevity is too great, which might shorten the life span of the next generation or even further, that is, the so-called "premature death by seniors' longevity". Therefore, the elderly is urged to give up their lives voluntarily, so as to win living space for their next generations. Without this high sense of responsibility to members with blood relationship based on blood connection, it is difficult to take such suicide action. The same is true for altruistic suicide

for assumption of responsibility and for burden alleviation. If it is not based on very strong blood connection, who would assume responsibility for a member of society at the cost of life? When we say “very strong blood connection”, it means members connected by blood are not completely independent individuals, but must be placed in a specific relationship. When this relationship covers a wide range, it can be a whole clan. In the past, there might be cases of altruistic suicide for assumption of responsibility or burden alleviation for the sake of clans. However, in the 30 years of the transition period we are looking at now, it seemed difficult to ask some members to commit suicide for their clans again in a tight-knit society that experienced the baptism of the May Fourth Movement and the revolutionary transformation after New China, but it was entirely possible for people to resort to suicide in a bid to take responsibility or reduce burdens for members within a smaller relationship range, such as relationships between three or two generations. Of course, in those 30 years, there were indeed members who died for their clans. For example, some clan members lost their lives in clan fighting for the vengeful suicide death of someone within the clan, which can be basically regarded as the product of this logic.

However, apart from altruistic suicide, egoistic suicide to evade is also shaped by very strong blood connection. Perhaps, this seems to be a paradox. According to the theoretical framework I constructed, since too strong connection can easily lead to altruistic suicide while too weak connection can easily lead to egoistic suicide, then why are there a large number of egoistic suicide cases in a tight-knit society? In fact, this paradox is not a fallacy, but has its own logical self-consistency. Links exist between social structure and the distribution proportions of egoistic suicide to vent anger, relief of suffering and escape from reality. Based on individual psychological factors, egoistic suicide to vent anger, which has a weak link with social structure, may exist in various social types, at least in the three social structure types I am going to describe. egoistic suicide to end suffering is more closely related to weaker blood connection. When the members of a society are relatively independent individuals, they are not subject to any structural social forces. At this time, when an independent individual experiences great or ordinary pain caused by physical or mental illness, his pain is more individual, and he can choose to commit suicide based on the consideration of getting rid of his own pain. When blood connection is strong, the individual's pain is more social, and the impact on society or groups is taken into account. Therefore, in a tight-knit society, egoistic suicide to end suffering must be relatively rare, which has been proven by the data aforementioned. Yet, there are some differences between egoistic suicide to evade and to end suffering.

First of all, we need to look into what suicides were running away from. From the narrative of cases of egoistic suicide to evade, what we can find is that those who committed this type of suicide, ran away from responsibilities in larger social units beyond family or even beyond blood ties, or responsibilities mainly limited in smaller blood-tied units such as a nuclear family.

Secondly, we need to examine how the strength of blood connection is linked with the degree of the sense of responsibility embedded in individuals that gives rise to various responsibilities. When the blood connection is stronger, individuals tend to have greater sense of responsibility to society. Suicide actors may consider giving up suicide based on their responsibility to society, especially to blood-related members. On the contrary, when the blood connection is weak, the suicide actor may carry out suicide action based on the consideration of his own pain. And the boundary of this suicide action tends to move towards or even enter egoistic suicide to end suffering.

However, things are dialectical. When the blood connection is too strong, it may push people with a high sense of responsibility to the other opposite, that is, evading responsibility, as reflected by the distribution of egoistic suicide to evade in a tight-knit society. We can further prove this by analyzing the distribution of egoistic suicide to evade in each age group. Generally speaking, the young and middle-aged have the greatest sense of responsibility to blood-related members, because they have to support the elderly, raise children and face fierce social competition or social comparison with people of the same age

group. Therefore, their suicide is more likely to be egoistic suicide to evade, while the elderly may resort to altruistic suicide for burden alleviation under the same circumstances. In fact, according to the data in the preceding tables in this chapter, in the three villages we selected to represent tight-knit society, egoistic suicide to evade indeed occurred mainly among young and middle-aged people, as shown by Mrs. Du's death in Case 2.11.

In general, we can preliminarily conclude that, in a tight-knit society, the distribution characteristics of altruistic suicide and egoistic suicide are shaped by stronger blood connection: altruistic suicide is relatively prominent (we can find this characteristic more distinctive by comparison in later chapters); and among the empirical types of egoistic suicide, egoistic suicide to evade is more pronounced, while egoistic suicide to end suffering is less obvious.

So, how do we understand the distribution characteristics of suicide of despair in a tight-knit society?

Just like the way we understand the distribution mechanism of egoistic suicide in a tight-knit society, we need to look into how the three empirical types of suicide of despair are distributed, and then make explanations accordingly.

In a Tight-knit Society featuring a very strong regulatory control system that would give rise to vengeful suicide, then why does suicide of despair occur in the society as well? In fact, the emergence of suicide of despair in a tight-knit society is essentially a result of an overly strong regulatory control system. By reviewing the distribution of the three empirical types of suicide of despair, we find that suicide of despair for survival reasons, which is caused by the unavailability of relief due to the collapse of the regulatory control system, is rare, with only two cases since 2005, while suicide of despair over value and emotion reasons are more common in this social type.

In essence, the emergence of suicide of despair over value is closely related to the relatively complete and powerful value system (part of the regulatory control system) in a tight-knit society. Take Case 2.9 as an example. Du Sen's death is obviously caused by his inability to realize the ontological value of carrying on the family line. For people in a tight-knit society, the significance of living is concretely embodied by starting families and having children so as to extend their lives. It is in such a value system that people know where they come from and where they will go. In their lifetime, people work for or even exist for three major circular tasks, that is, "raising children (giving birth to and having sons), building houses, and getting a wife (to have children again)" (Yang 2007a). For an actor of suicide of despair over value like Du Sen, the dashed hope of getting a wife means that the link of raising children is broken, and naturally the meaning of living becomes a question. Once he accidentally has suicidal thoughts, suicide becomes an inevitability. Conversely, if there is no such a strong value system in a tight-knit society in place, people living within would not necessarily harbor suicide thoughts once they fail to achieve the circular tasks.

Similarly, suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems is conducted when the basic emotional values of life, such as affection between blood relations, and romantic relations, are not achieved. Take affection between blood relations as an example. If a whole set of rule system based on affection expectation is lost, relatives, especially intergenerational family members, will have no expectation towards each other, because they already know the basic behavior patterns. In the above-mentioned case in which two old people both committed suicide because their daughters-in-law gave them not completely steamed buns to eat during the Dragon Boat Festival, we can see that the elderly, as seniors, had strong emotional expectations of their sons and daughters-in-law as juniors in daily life. Obviously, the elderly not only strongly expected that her daughter-in-law offer her steamed buns during the Dragon Boat Festival, but that the buns should be satisfactory. Therefore, we can imagine that if the daughter-in-law didn't even give the steamed buns to her mother-in-law on that day, then the emotional despair suffered by the elderly would be more serious. When the mother-in-law got the buns sent by her daughter-in-law, her expectation became even higher, such as the buns must be delicious. Therefore, when she received the not fully steamed buns, she thought the daughter-in-law was intentional. The buns broke the rule

system in the mother-in-law's expectation. When the mother-in-law committed suicide, she said to her husband, "She (referring to the daughter-in-law) usually gave us fully steamed buns to eat. Today, she did this on purpose. She wanted to tell us that it's time for us to stop having her send us food. We must show good sense, ending our lives so as to meet her wish."

The same logic can be applied to the expectation of love. Quite prominent in the 1980s and early 1990s, the situation where parents' interference in their children's marriage led to their children's suicide reflects, on the one hand, the domination of parents over children in the context of too strong blood connection, and on the other hand, the youth's expectation of love. Young people who had just been "liberated" from the "old system" began to boldly pursue love, but when encountering setbacks, many of them chose to commit suicide, such as Wang Guiyun in Case 2.14. In addition, some young people also took suicide actions after encountering failure in their romantic relationships (such as being "abandoned" by their boyfriends or girlfriends). For those married, the intervention and frustration in love mainly came from extramarital affairs, and some of them resorted to vengeful suicide as a threat or suicide of despair.

In the final analysis, the marked distribution of suicide of despair over value and emotion reasons and the rare distribution of suicide of despair for survival reasons result from the strong regulatory control system in a tight-knit society.

After explaining the generation mechanism of these basic three suicide types and their empirical types, we need to further explain the marked changes in distribution of suicide types in different time periods, which means how different suicide waves were formed in different time periods judged from changes in suicide rate. Of course, the "waves" can be either "flowing" or "ebbing".

We have already mentioned that the higher suicide rate in the 1980s and 1990s in a tight-knit society was mainly due to the frequent occurrence of vengeful suicide, with vengeful suicide among young women being the most important reason for the overall suicide rate rise. In the distribution of egoistic suicide, the proportion of egoistic suicide to vent anger was relatively stable, while egoistic suicide to evade experienced a clear uptrend after 2000. The marked increase in altruistic suicide since 2000 compared with the 1990s could be attributed to the mix effect of the sharp decline in revenge suicide mainly among young women and the gradual increase in suicide among the elderly. As far as suicide of despair is concerned, both suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems and value reasons did not appear again after 2000, while 2 cases of suicide of despair for survival reasons occurred after 2000 for the first time. All these changes are, in essence, due to the weakening of the blood connection in a tight-knit society. In other words, the trend of disintegration of tight-knit society brought about the changes.

First of all, in terms of the generally stable egoistic suicide to vent anger, it is hard to analyze its changes. And I have emphasized earlier that this type of suicide might be significantly linked to psychological factors of suicides. Secondly, egoistic suicide to evade is essentially caused by too strong blood connection, but in fact, it emerged from changes. When too strong blood connection subtly became weaker, the most important change, the suicide actor's sense of responsibility to society tended to be reduced. Therefore, the super-strong sense of responsibility would turn into evasive behavior, and the faster the blood connection weakened, the faster the growth of egoistic suicide to evade would be.

Similar to the changing trend of the regulatory control system, although blood connection in a tight-knit society was still strong before the 1980s, due to the function of the people's commune system, many issues that would have to rely on families or clans based on blood ties to solve before 1949 could be better addressed within national administrative organizations. In other words, as the national regulatory control system temporarily suppressed the local regulatory control system during this period and played a major role, villagers in a tight-knit society temporarily invoked organizational systems at the national level to solve problems while mediating and dealing with various affairs. Thus, they did not resort to the blood relationship within the society too much. For example, family disputes

might be mediated by clan forces before, but at this time, several levels of organizations such as production teams, brigades and communes played a major role.

Likewise, in the first 15–20 years since the early 1980s, with the disintegration of the people's commune system, the strength of blood connection returned to a great level in a short time. The role of blood connection was renewed in the dealing with matters in daily life. This realistic change led to people's higher sense of responsibility formed based on blood connection, and people had high expectations towards each other. It is with this change that altruistic suicide, egoistic suicide to evade, suicide of despair over value and emotion reasons all showed an obvious upward trend in the 20 years from the 1980s to the 1990s. This period, however, was when the interaction between blood connection and the regulatory control system was recovered, and at the same time, tight-knit society was eroded by modernity, especially by the unprecedented force of market rules with rationality as the core feature. People who once had a high sense of responsibility to other family members based on blood connection gradually became a market rational person relying on rational calculation. Concepts such as emotions and values were gradually secularized. Clan color began to fade. The concept of marriage and love gradually transitioned from the original belief that divorce was a shame to the belief that personal happiness was the most important. "You can live with anyone, and you can live without anyone." Gradually gained ground, and the traditional concepts of carrying on family lines, such as having sons, began to be diluted by the constant erosion of the idea of "men and women are the same; men and women are equal".

It is these changes that prompt an increase in egoistic suicide to evade, and a decrease in suicide of despair over value and emotional reasons. However, these changes are also likely to lead to another form of suicide wave. For example, egoistic suicide to end suffering and suicide of despair for survival reasons will gradually increase until they enter into mainstream in the future. According to the experience of tight-knit society, the two cases of suicide of despair for survival reasons undoubtedly had a great impact on people's ideas, because they were sudden and accidental. But just like the wave of vengeful suicide during the only 20 years after the early 1980s, suicide of despair for survival reasons is also likely to change the whole social structure, thus furthering the disintegration of tight-knit society that has already begun its breakdown process. As a result, these sudden and accidental cases of suicide of despair for survival reasons are likely to form a new wave of suicide of despair like vengeful suicide. Further, we find that the reduced role of clan and patriarchy, resulted from the weakening of both the regulatory control and blood connection with patriarchal system such as clan system as the core, is accompanied by the sharp drop in suicide rate of young people, especially young women, but the gradual increase in suicide rate of the elderly.

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# Footnotes

1 Gui Hua, Zhong Qin and others joined me in the survey.

2 This chapter uses some of the data collected by Yang Hua and Yuan Song (which are also under their own responsibility), and I would like to express my gratitude for them.

3 The data was collected during my fieldwork, and may have changed now.

4 At that time, the three villages (Feng, Tao and Guan Village) was a whole, with where Feng Village is now located having a population of more than 2000, before being divided into three parts.

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# 3. Farmer Suicide in a Loose-Knit Society

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Having explored suicides among farmers in a tight-knit society, we will proceed to discuss those occurring in a loose-knit society, and explore similarities and differences between the occurrences in the two types of society. As defined in the theoretical framework, a loose-knit society refers to one with a moderate degree of kinship bonds and of regulatory control.

## 1 Overview

To investigate the phenomenon and the pattern of suicide in a loose-knit society, I chose four villages with a social structure similar to that of a loose-knit society. Two villages are located in the city of Xinyang in southern Henan Province. With only three kilometers apart, they have a similar population and are close in many other aspects; and both of them belong to the same town. For the sake of simplicity, I combined these two villages into one in my academic writing and gave it the new name Yu Village. The other two villages are located in the same town that is part of the city of Qinhuangdao in north-eastern Hebei Province, and are six kilometers apart. Also, I combined them into one and called it Ji Village. The field investigation in Yu Village lasted for almost one month from early July to early August, 2010. Besides myself, participants in the field investigation in Yu Village included Prof. Luo Xingzuo, Wang Defu, Tian Meng, Xing Chengju, Liu Sheng, Xu Jiahong, and Lei Wanghong.[1] The field investigation in Ji Village was finished by myself, lasting for almost one month from April 9 to May 6, 2011. The population of Yu Village was 4846 while the population of Ji Village was 2790. The total population was 7636. Here, the population refers to the registered population in the village.

Like what we did in a tight-knit society, we gathered information on suicides and suicide attempts in a loose-knit society as detailed as possible. And we still focused on the period from 1980 to 2009. Thanks to a comprehensive investigation, we gathered 79 suicide cases that had occurred in the 30 years with an annual suicide rate of 34.49 per 100,000 individuals on average. This is significantly lower than the 45.37 per 100,000 individuals in a tight-knit society. See Table 1.

***Table 1*** Suicide deaths among farmers in a loose-knit society (persons, %)

| Gender | Age groups | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Young (15–34) | Middle-aged (35–39) | Old (60 and above) | Total |
| Male | 9 (11.39) | 13 (16.46) | 12 (15.19) | 34 (43.04) |
| Female | 19 (24.05) | 15 (18.99) | 11 (13.92) | 45 (56.96) |
| Total | 28 (35.44) | 28 (35.44) | 23 (29.11) | 79 (100.00) |

We could see from Table 1 that in the middle-aged group 28 persons committed suicide, which was a quite prominent number. But we could also see that there was no big gap

between the three age groups in the number of suicides, with the young and middle-aged groups each accounting for about 35% and the old age group nearly 30%. Therefore, each age group took up around one-third of total suicides. Apparently, that was quite different from the tight-knit society discussed in the previous chapter in which youth suicides accounted for a whopping 62.22%. As for gender, there was no significant difference between male and female in the middle-aged group and the old age group in the number of suicide cases while significantly more young women took their lives than young men. The gap between genders in youth suicide was similar to that in a tight-knit society, though the gap in a tight-knit society was much wider.

From the proportion of each age group, we could more clearly see the basic features of suicide among farmers in a loose-knit society in which female cases were two times higher than male cases in the young age group. However, in a tight-knit society, that number rose to nearly seven times. On one hand, that was because the total number of youth suicide in a loose-knit society was lower than that in a tight-knit society. On the other hand, it meant slightly more young men committed suicide in a loose-knit society than in a tight-knit society. Since the difference between two genders was not very obvious for the middle-aged and old age groups, the difference between the two genders in suicide numbers in a loose-knit society was significantly smaller than that in a tight-knit society. Therefore, as we need to focus on suicide among young females in a tight-knit society, it is important that we pay attention to the reasons why middle-aged people commit suicide in a loose-knit society.

Like our research on suicide rate in a tight-knit society, the suicide rate in this chapter also refers to a rough annual suicide rate. See Table 2 for population composition in a loose-knit society by gender and age.

***Table 2*** Population composition by gender and age in a loose-knit society

| Gender | Age groups | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Young | Middle-aged | Old |
| Male | 1039 | 1381 | 403 |
| Female | 1050 | 1312 | 405 |
| Total | 2089 | 2693 | 808 |

Table 3 shows suicide rate in a loose-knit society by gender and age.

***Table 3*** Suicide rate by gender and age in a loose-knit society, 1980–2009 (1/100,000)

| Gender | Age | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Young | Middle-aged | Old |
| Male | 28.87 | 31.38 | 99.26 |
| Female | 60.32 | 38.11 | 90.53 |
| Total | 44.68 | 34.66 | 94.88 |

We could compare the data in Table 3 with the data in the previous chapter.

First, in terms of age, we could see that in a loose-knit society, the gap between the three age groups in suicide rate was smaller than that in a tight-knit society. The suicide rate of each age group would be close when adjusted for population. Second, suicide rate of youth and old age groups were lower than that in a tight-knit society. The big difference was that suicide rate of young women in a loose-knit society was more than two times higher than that in a tight-knit society while suicide rate of young men in a loose-knit society was a bit higher than that in the untied society. Third, the most prominent feature was that suicide rate of the middle-aged group in a loose-knit society was 1.5 times higher than that in a tight-knit society. The suicide rate of both genders was greatly higher than that in a tight-knit society.

As for gender, the difference between genders in a loose-knit society was less obvious than that in a tight-knit society. In particular, both genders had similar suicide rate in the

middle and old age groups in a loose-knit society. By contrast, in the young age group, since suicide rate was relatively higher among young men, the difference between the two genders was less significant than that in a tight-knit society. Of course, in a loose-knit society, the suicide rate of young women was much higher than that of young men, which was something that the two types of society had in common when viewed from a bigger picture.

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# 2 Types of Farmer Suicide in a Loose-Knit Society

## 2.1 Distribution of Ideal Types of Farmer Suicide in a Loose-Knit Society

Based on the empirical evidence of suicides among farmers, we divided suicides into four types by the intention of those who committed suicide: egoistic suicide, altruistic suicide, vengeful suicide and suicide of despair. So what were the types of suicide committed by farmers in a loose-knit society? We may first take a look at Table 4.

***Table 4*** Distribution of suicide types among farmers in a loose-knit society

| Type of suicide | Egoistic suicide | Altruistic suicide | Vengeful suicide | Suicide of despair | Other | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of people | 35 | 10 | 7 | 26 | 1 | 79 |
| Percentage (%) | 44.30 | 12.66 | 8.86 | 32.91 | 1.27 | 100.00 |

We could see that in a loose-knit society, egoistic suicide and suicide of despair were two main types of suicide. The proportion of altruistic suicide was also relatively high while there were fewer cases of vengeful suicide. By comparing this data of the loose-knit society with that of the tight-knit society shown in the previous chapter, we could see some more interesting features of the loose-knit society. In the tight-knit society, vengeful suicide took up the largest share, accounting for over half of all suicide cases. However, vengeful suicide did not take up a large share in a loose-knit society.

Unlike in a tight-knit society in which egoistic suicide and suicide of despair accounted for almost the same share, the proportion of egoistic suicide was higher than that of suicide of despair in a loose-knit society. As we had assumed in the theoretical framework when establishing the theoretical model, suicide types in a loose-knit society would show a mixed distribution, meaning that all types should account for a similar share without a single type taking up a significant share. So did the data in Table 4 overthrow this theoretical hypothesis? We went on to examine the distribution of the suicide types by age and gender in a loose-knit society. See Table 5.

***Table 5*** Distribution of suicide types by gender and age in a loose-knit society

| Type of suicide | Egoistic suicide | | Altruistic suicide | | Vengeful suicide | | Suicide of despair | | Other | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| Young | 5.06 | 7.59 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 3.80 | 6.33 | 11.39 | 0.00 | 1.27 |
| Middle-aged | 13.92 | 11.39 | 1.27 | 3.80 | 0.00 | 3.80 | 1.27 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| Old | 3.80 | 2.53 | 5.06 | 2.53 | 0.00 | 1.27 | 6.33 | 7.59 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| Total | 22.78 | 21.51 | 6.33 | 6.33 | 0.00 | 8.87 | 13.93 | 18.98 | 0.00 | 1.27 |

The data in Table 5 showed the distribution of suicide types in a loose-knit society by age and gender, from which we could see egoistic suicide among middle-aged men accounted for the largest share (13.92%). Egoistic suicide among middle-aged women and suicide of despair among old women and young women come in second, each covering 11.39%, not much lower than the proportion of egoistic suicide among middle-aged men. Apart from that, there did not appear to be a significant gap between different age groups and genders in the same type of suicide. By contrast, when looking back at the distribution of suicide types in a

tight-knit society by age and gender shown in the last chapter, we could see that vengeful suicide among young women covered the largest share, reaching as high as 40.00%. Suicide of despair among young women ranked second with a proportion of 8.89%, significantly lower than vengeful suicide. Based on the comparison, we could draw the conclusion that the suicide types in a loose-knit society still showed a relatively mixed distribution. Therefore, our hypothesis in the theoretical framework could be confirmed. Of course, with a relatively mixed distribution, egoistic suicide among middle-aged men and women, suicide of despair among young men and women as well as suicide of despair among old-aged men and women were apparently prominent features of the loose-knit society. This was what we needed to examine and give an explanation for in comparison with the fact that vengeful suicide among young women took up the largest share in a tight-knit society. To observe the distribution of suicide types in a loose-knit society in greater detail, we made further analysis on the distribution of suicide types in male and female by age groups. See Table 6.

***Table 6*** Distribution of suicide types by gender and age in three age groups in a loose-knit society

| Type of Suicide | Egoistic Suicide | | Altruistic Suicide | | Vengeful Suicide | | Suicide of Despair | | Other | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| Young | 14.29 | 21.43 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 10.71 | 17.86 | 32.14 | 0.00 | 3.57 |
| Middle-aged | 39.29 | 32.14 | 3.57 | 10.71 | 0.00 | 10.71 | 3.57 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| Old | 13.04 | 8.70 | 17.39 | 8.70 | 0.00 | 4.35 | 21.74 | 26.09 | 0.00 | 0.00 |

As a proportion of the total suicide deaths among each age group, %

Based on the data from Table 6, we could further observe that in the young age group, suicide of despair and egoistic suicide in female, suicide of despair and egoistic suicide in male as well as vengeful suicide in female covered a relatively large share. In the middle-aged group, egoistic suicide in both genders as well as altruistic suicide and vengeful suicide among women were the main types. In the old age group, suicide of despair, altruistic suicide and egoistic suicide were the main types for both genders. Therefore, relatively speaking, suicide types in a loose-knit society showed a distribution with some types accounting for a relatively larger share.

## 2.2 Distribution of Farmer Suicide by Empirical Type in a Loose-Knit Society

Investigating empirical types in each suicide type could on one hand, shed more light on suicide in a loose-knit society in greater detail, and on the other hand help us more carefully compare suicide in a loose-knit society with that in a tight-knit society. See Table 7.

***Table 7*** Distribution of suicide by empirical type in a loose-knit society

| Ideal type | Egoistic suicide | | | Altruistic suicide | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Empirical type | Evade | End suffering | Vent anger | Honor | Relief of burden | Responsibility |
| Number of people | 10 | 6 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 2 |
| Percentage (%) | 12.66 | 7.59 | 3.80 | 3.80 | 6.33 | 2.53 |

| Ideal type | Suicide of despair | | | Vengeful suicide | | | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Empirical type | Value | Marriage and relationship problems | Survival problem | Defense against slander | Threat | Punishment | |
| Number of people | 2 | 13 | 11 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Percentage (%) | 2.53 | 16.46 | 13.92 | 3.80 | 2.53 | 2.53 | 1.27 |

We could see from Table 7 that in a loose-knit society, common empirical types in suicide included egoistic suicide to evade, egoistic suicide to end suffering, suicide of despair over

marriage and relationship problems, suicide of despair over survival problems and to altruistic suicide for relief of burden. Apparently, we could discover the clear features of suicide in a loose-knit society when comparing the data above with that in the previous chapter.

First, vengeful suicide and its empirical types were the most prominent in a tight-knit society. Punishment in vengeful suicide, as the most prominent empirical type in its suicide type, reached a proportion as high as 31.11%, way higher than the proportion of the most common empirical type in a loose-knit society. Moreover, to vengeful suicide as a threat accounted for 18.89% in a tight-knit society, also higher than any empirical type in Table 7, though the share of vengeful suicide as a defense against slander was quite low in a tight-knit society. On the contrary, vengeful suicide was not prominent in a loose-knit society. Among the three empirical types in vengeful suicide, vengeful suicide as a defense against slander was the least prominent empirical type in its suicide type in a tight-knit society. But in a loose-knit society, its proportion was the largest in its suicide type. It was true that the absolute number was small due to the limited sample size, but it was indeed an interesting phenomenon in a loose-knit society. At the same time, the three empirical types in vengeful suicide in a loose-knit society showed a relatively flat or mixed distribution.

Second, the top six empirical types in a tight-knit society were: vengeful suicide as a punishment, vengeful suicide as a threat, egoistic suicide to vent anger, suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems, egoistic suicide to evade and suicide of despair over value. By contrast, the top five empirical types in a loose-knit society revealed by Table 7 were: suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems, suicide of despair over survival problems, egoistic suicide to evade, egoistic suicide to end suffering and altruistic suicide for relief of burden. And the rest empirical types each took up about the same share. Among the top five, only suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems and egoistic suicide to evade were also seen in the top six of the tight-knit society. This could further demonstrate that the distribution of suicide types in a loose-knit society did show a mixed distribution with some types accounting for a relatively larger share. Unlike in a tight-knit society where the most common suicide type could take up a very large share, the most common suicide type in a loose-knit society did not account for a share that large.

To conclude, compared with the tight-knit society, the distribution of suicide types among farmers in a loose-knit society had the following features: a mixed distribution with some types accounting for a relatively larger share; the most prominent types included egoistic suicide to evade among middle-aged men and women, suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems among young men and women as well as suicide of despair over survival problems among old men and women.

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# 3 Changes in Farmer Suicide in a Loose-Knit Society

We started by looking at the overall changes in the suicide rate in a loose-knit society. First, we observed the changes in suicide rates by decade. Then we examined the changes in each period in more details. See Table 8.

***Table 8*** Suicide rates by decade in a loose-knit society (1/100,000)

| Decade | 1980–1989 | 1990–1999 | 2000–2009 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Suicide rate | 31.43 | 22.26 | 49.76 |

As was shown by Table 8, the suicide rate in a loose-knit society was U-shaped: high in both ends and low in the middle. It was the opposite of the tight-knit society. Comparing Table 8 to Table 7 in Chap. 2, we could see that in the 1980s, suicide rate in a loose-knit society was lower than that of the tight-knit society while during the 1990s suicide rate went up in a tight-knit society but came down in a loose-knit society. Suicide rate then became higher after 2000, which was in stark contrast to the sharp decline in suicide rate in

a tight-knit society during the same period. We continued to examine the changes in suicide rate over time in greater detail by Table 9.

***Table 9*** Suicide rates by five-year period in a loose-knit society (1/100,000)

| Period | 1980– | 1985– | 1990– | 1995– | 2000– | 2005– |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Suicide rate | 34.05 | 28.81 | 28.81 | 15.72 | 36.67 | 62.86 |

We could see that suicide rate in the early 1980s was relatively high compared with lower suicide rate during the 1970s, from which we could conclude it was likely that the dramatic changes in the social system at the macro level led to the first wave of suicides whether in a loose-knit society or the tight-knit society. This could be discovered by looking at the data of the tight-knit society in Table 8 in Chap. 2. During the next 15 years, suicide rate in a loose-knit society stayed stable and then went down but soared during the first decade of this century. In particular, it reached a nearly-30-year high in the recent five years. On the contrary, suicide rate in a tight-knit society reached a high level in late 1990s and fell rapidly in the recent 10 years, reaching a nearly-30-year low in the last five years. Therefore, if we were to describe the major trend of suicide in a tight-knit society during the last two decades as tides rising and then receding, then the major trend of suicide in a loose-knit society would be like tides falling and then rising.

Obviously, only figuring out the simple major changes described above was not enough. We needed to further examine the change in suicide rate of which age group had effected the overall suicide rate. This was the only way for us to engage in well-directed discussion of certain issues afterwards. See Table 10 for changes in suicide rate by age and gender.

***Table 10*** Suicide rate by decade, gender and age in a loose-knit society (1/100,000)

| Decade | | 1980–1989 | | 1990–1999 | | 2000–2009 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| Age group | Young | 19.25 | 104.76 | 19.25 | 47.62 | 48.12 | 28.57 |
| | Middle-aged | 43.45 | 15.24 | 43.45 | 30.49 | 36.21 | 38.11 |
| | Old | 24.81 | 49.38 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 272.95 | 222.22 |

Data from Table 10 showed that the biggest change in suicide rate occurred in the old age group while the young age group saw a smaller change. And suicide rate had been relatively stable among middle-aged people.

After examining the basic change in the distribution of suicide rate, we continued to observe the change in suicide types by listing them in order of proportion. We could also compare this list with the one of the tight-knit society.

We first examined the overall change of the basic suicide types. See Table 11.

***Table 11*** Distribution of basic suicide type by decade in a loose-knit society (%)

| Decade | Type of suicide | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Egoistic suicide | Altruistic suicide | Suicide of despair | Vengeful suicide |
| 1980–1989 | 43.48 | 17.39 | 30.43 | 8.70 |
| 1990–1999 | 76.47 | 0.00 | 17.65 | 5.88 |
| 2000–2009 | 26.32 | 21.05 | 42.11 | 10.53 |

Based on data in the above table, we could learn that in a loose-knit society, egoistic suicide and suicide of despair always ranked the first or the second, no matter what year. The changes between these two suicide types were as follows. In 1980s, the former ranked the first and the latter ranked the second. In 1990s, the former accounted for an overwhelming majority while the latter was far behind but still ranked the second. Since 2000, the latter became the first while the proportion of the former fell greatly. Although it

still ranked the second, altruistic suicide which ranked the third was not far behind. By comparison, there was no significant change in vengeful suicide in a loose-knit society. In contrast, in a tight-knit society, since vengeful suicide topped the list in both 1980s and 1990s, other suicide types were not prominent. During the first decade since 2000, it was due to the sharp decline of vengeful suicide in a tight-knit society that the distribution of other types began to become closer to that of the loose-knit society. In both types of society, egoistic suicide and suicide of despair began to take up a relatively larger share. Another prominent feature was that altruistic suicide also went up in both societies during these 10 years. According to our judgement made in the theoretical framework, the increase of egoistic suicide and suicide of despair was a trend while the decrease of vengeful suicide and altruistic suicide was also a trend. But why were there more suicides out of altruism in the recent 10 years? We should not jump to conclusion as further examination with greater detail was needed to answer the question. See data in Table 12.

***Table 12*** Distribution of different types of suicide by age in a loose-knit society (%)

| Decade | Age | Type of suicide | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Egoistic suicide | Altruistic suicide | Suicide of despair | Vengeful suicide |
| 1980–1989 | Young | 0.00 | 13.04 | 30.43 | 8.70 |
| | Middle-aged | 34.78 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| | Old | 8.70 | 4.35 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| 1990–1999 | Young | 23.53 | 0.00 | 17.65 | 0.00 |
| | Middle-aged | 52.94 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 5.88 |
| | Old | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| 2000–2009 | Young | 7.89 | 0.00 | 10.53 | 2.63 |
| | Middle-aged | 7.89 | 10.53 | 2.63 | 5.26 |
| | Old | 10.53 | 10.53 | 28.95 | 2.63 |

The goal of examining the data from Table 12 was to figure out the change of which age group caused the change in the proportion of a certain suicide type. First, we looked at the 1980s. During these 10 years, egoistic suicide among the middle-aged was prominent, with its proportion being the biggest. Moreover, suicide of despair among young people was also prominent, taking up the second largest share. Next, we observed the changes in the 1990s. Egoistic suicide of the middle-aged group still accounted for the largest share, with a significant increase in its proportion while egoistic suicide of the young age group became the second place. Accordingly, suicide of despair among young people that had ranked the second became the third. Lastly, we observed the changes in the recent 10 years since 2000. Generally, the distribution of suicide types in the decade was more mixed, but there were also obvious changes, namely suicide of despair of the old age group going from zero percent to covering the largest share. Egoistic suicide and altruistic suicide among old people ranked the second together with suicide of despair among young people and altruistic suicide among middle-aged people. Therefore, the proportion of both egoistic suicide of the middle-aged group and suicide of despair of the young age group dropped drastically. So we could say that these 10 years saw relatively dramatic changes in the distribution of suicide types. Essentially, the key was that during the 10 years since 2000, suicide among old people, with its sudden increase, took up the share that used to be taken up by suicide among young and middle-aged people. That, in turn, resulted in lower proportion of suicide among young and middle-aged people. So on the whole, such changes in a loose-knit society were the basically the same as those in a tight-knit society.

Now that we had grasped the distribution of basic suicide types in a loose-knit society, we went on to observe the changes in empirical types in more detail. Due to limited sample size, there would be a lack of data when we tried to break the samples down into more specific categories. Therefore, as we did with analyzing changes of empirical types in a tight-knit

society, again we selected the major empirical types, namely those with larger proportions for our observation. See Table 13.

***Table 13*** Distribution of several empirical types in the loose-knit society (%)

| Empirical type | Decade | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 1980–1989 | 1990–1999 | 2000–2009 |
| Suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems | 26.09 | 17.65 | 10.53 |
| Egoistic suicide to evade | 21.74 | 29.41 | 13.16 |
| Egoistic suicide to end suffering | 21.74 | 17.65 | 13.16 |
| Suicide of despair over survival problems | 0.00 | 0.00 | 28.95 |

In Table 13, we listed four major empirical types in a loose-knit society, namely suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems, egoistic suicide to evade, egoistic suicide to end suffering and suicide of despair over survival problems.

In terms of suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems, there was difference between the two types of society. The majority of this empirical type in a loose-knit society was young people and such suicide was mostly caused by parental interference in young women's marriage or failed marriages between some young men and women, while in a tight-knit society, a small number of such suicide also resulted from old people unable to emotionally accept certain behaviors of their children. As for egoistic suicide to evade, it was seen in the three age groups of both genders in a tight-knit society, while in a loose-knit society, this empirical type was almost only observed in the middle-aged people. In terms of to get out of egoistic suicide to end suffering, it was rare in a tight-knit society, but mostly observed in young and middle-aged people in a loose-knit society. In both types of society, suicide of despair over survival problems could be found in old people but this empirical type only just appeared in a tight-knit society in small numbers. By contrast, it was common in a loose-knit society.

On the basis of prior discussion, we could find by analyzing the data in Table 12 once more that in the 1980s, no suicide of despair over survival problems was reported and the proportion of the rest of the three expedience types was quite close. The slightly more prominent suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems meant that during this decade, suicide caused by setbacks in marriage and relationship was quite serious. While in the 1990s, suicide of despair over survival problems was still zero and the proportion of egoistic suicide to evade became significantly higher, which was related to suicide among middle-aged people. Suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems and egoistic suicide to end suffering still accounted for larger shares, showing that suicide as a result of setbacks in marriage and relationship (still mostly due to parental interference) in young people remained a problem. In the 10 years since 2000, the most obvious change was that the proportion of suicide of despair over survival problems soared from zero during the previous 20 years to the first place. By comparison, the proportion of the other three empirical types declined drastically. The decrease of suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems reflected that suicide of despair among young women due to parental interference in their marriage was clearly in decline. This was a revolutionary change, though this empirical type still took up a fair share, mainly due to divorce and other new setbacks in marriage faced by some young men. Also, with more open attitude on marriage and relationship, divorce is likely to further reduce suicide among young people as concluded in the discussion of the previous chapter. Of course, it remains to be seen whether that would be a good new or bad news for those young men with a disadvantage in the marriage market. The decline of egoistic suicide to evade and its presence also showed that on one hand, people had started to deal with the pressure in their life more rationally instead of taking peer pressure and competition too seriously. On the other hand, it meant such peer pressure and competition did exist and continued to have an impact on the suicide

among middle-aged people. The more complex mechanism behind such changes is the focus of our following discussion.

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# 4 Mechanism for Farmer Suicide in a Loose-Knit Society

## 4.1 Suicide Among Young People in a Loose-Knit Society

Suicide among young people in a loose-knit society is related largely to marriage. Suicide of unmarried persons was mainly caused by arranged marriage or interference in their falling in love by their parents; suicide of married persons was largely because of quarrels in married life or extramarital affairs. Moreover, some young persons committed suicide to air their grievances against their parents who they felt were too manipulative. By comparison, suicide of young people whose marriage their parents interfered with was more notable, most common in the 1980s and not uncommon in the 1990s. Fewer suicides occurs in a loose-knit society than in a tight-knit society among women who have conflicts with their husbands' mothers or fathers.

Let's first take a look at the suicide of a young woman, which, though quite a recent case, is quite typical of suicide among young women in a society that the victim lived in.

**Case 3.1**

> Chen Ying, female, aged 27, committed suicide by drinking pesticide on the 8th day of the first lunar month, 2009, leaving behind her 3-year-old son.

It is a case that impressed me very much during my survey in Ji Village. When I was about to leave Ji Village, I paid a visit to her father, mother, and her lovely son. The moment I saw the child, I gave up the idea that I originally had had of inquiring about her suicide, because I really could not bear it. It was in my first interview, conducted in the morning of the second day after my arrival at Ji Village, that I learned about her suicide. On the recommendation of a village official, on that morning I found a middle-aged conversationalist man, surnamed Fang, for an interview. He was a teacher of a middle school in the town, and his wife was a farmer. He often returned to the village for a stay, and so was quite familiar with happenings in the village. In the beginning, I asked him questions that were not much sensitive, like village culture, history, local tradition, villager relationship, and family structure. In the interview, I found that he was not only good at talking but showed quite a good level of familiarity with, and judgment and analysis of, village affairs. Late in the morning, I felt that I still had half an hour to an hour for the interview, and so I shifted topics from disputes within families to the subject of suicide. I asked him, in probing, "Is there anyone who took things too hard, since there are so many conflicts or disputes between women and their mothers-in-law, husbands and wives, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, between neighbors and so on?" Teacher Fang smiled and said frankly, "Sure. Certainly. You mean suicide, right? Of course, there is, and not a few committed suicides." I'd like to know more about it," I said. He then asked what every person I had interviewed would ask when I mentioned this topic: "What use is it of you asking this since they all died?" I had seen that he was quite a learned teacher, and so I explained very briefly that I would use it for my research and I was a researcher on this. He smiled and said, "Oh, I didn't know that there are people researching this. I tell you several cases." The first person that he talked about was Chen Ying who had committed suicide.

> There behind my house, Chen Zhong's daughter, Chen Ying, took her own life by drinking pesticide. Chen Zhong had no son, and into his family Chen Ying's husband had married. The father of Chen Ying's husband was an idle good-for-nothing who had borrowed a lot of money that her father guaranteed. More and more such guarantees made Chen Ying worried, knowing that her father-in-law was unable to pay his debts and so was her father who was also quite old, that it would at last be she and her husband that would have to pay those debts. So, on the eve of New Year, when her

> father-in-law once again asked her father to guarantee a sum of money, Chen Ying probably set a trap so that her father didn't provide the guarantee. Her father-in-law, after knowing about it, mouthed swear words at her, and her husband gave her a beating. She probably was so unbearably indignant that she drank pesticide and died, leaving a child, a boy that was just three years old.

He paused there. I had not cut in while he had been speaking. But, from his presence—especially his expression and tone while speaking, as an interviewer I could sense his meaning, basic standpoint, and what he felt to be important, which were very important for me to make sense of suicide mechanisms for this locality. When he said that Chen Zhong had no son and a daughter in a matrilocal marriage, his face and voice were overflowing with pride he took in having a son, and with pity for others having a daugher in a matrilocal marriage. And especially after he finished the line, he gave a swift cuddle to his little grandson playing naked on the *kang*, kissed it twice and let go of it—the movements displaying to the full that concealed frame of mind of his. The second crucial message is about the direct cause of Chen Ying's suicide. The tragedy was related to her father-in-law's debts, but the persons involved behaved quite differently. Chen Zhong was a passive man, who had guaranteed debts whenever he was asked to. But what Chen Ying considered, and she did so from a nuclear family standpoint, was what those debts would mean to her and her husband in the future. Her father-in-law was an idle good-for-nothing who lived by borrowing and, when he was unable to borrow money because of no guarantee provided, swore at his daughter-in-law—a sort of behavior which could completely be understandable had it occurred in the 1980s or earlier, but which seems to be somewhat incredible against the backdrop of increasing cases of suicide of despair over survival problems among old people in the latest ten years. Chen Ying's husband, on the other hand, resorted to domestic violence, leading to her suicide. The third message is that the interviewee started off with embellishment that Chen Zhong had no son, and ended in feeling pity for him having a grandson but losing a live. I had not asked if the suicide victim had a child, and the interviewee must have thought it important to speak of in so brief an account. And especially, that he added it was "a body" made me discern possible subtleties of it all the more, because he had mentioned with much stress the importance of having a son when had talked about family planning just now. But these thoughts only served as inspirations to me rather than my judgment, otherwise I would be too hasty in making conclusions. Those inspirations represented my obsessive academic sensitivity that I had over the years developed through interviews. As always, while I was quickly witting down these thoughts on the notebook, I said instinctively, "You've spoken of it very well. Go ahead. I'm taking notes." Teacher Fang appeared encouraged, and though I had encouraged him many times the whole morning in the interview, he put his grandson down on the Kang lovingly and went on to speak.

> This Chen Zhong had three daughters. The one who drank pesticide was the second oldest in the family, a good-looking graduate of a technical secondary school. His youngest daughter had attended university and was not that subservient, and this oldest daughter had early married. Probably he had wanted to find a husband who would marry into the family for his youngest daughter, whose admission into a university, however, made the matter hopeless. So it could but be the second oldest daughter to make his wish come truth - a wish to have a son-in-law accepted into his family so that he could be provided for in his old age. Chen Zhong's matrilocal son-in-law looked to be quite a good match for his second oldest daughter but had had little formal education, and so presumably the daughter had not wanted to marry him but relented because she had no other choice - you could not be so hard-hearted as to make your father a '*juehu qi'er*',[2] one uncared for in old age, right? This son-in-law was able to drive - and it is a skill anyway - and so was one that a woman could pass

the days with. Presumably his second oldest daughter had consented to the marriage, albeit reluctantly.

He paused and once again gave his grandson a cuddle, pinched its buttocks several times playfully, and put it down on the *kang* lovingly. The words that he said just now also revealed very important messages. Therefore, while he was sporting with his grandson, I made further inquiries about such things as finding a son-in-law for providing for oneself in old age. To sum up, there are some points worth noting. First, he stressed once again that Chen Zhong had no son, which fact seems to have foreshadowed the suicide of Chen Ying. Second, the direct consequence of having no son was to find for one of the three daughters a husband who would marry into the family, obviously to provide for him in old age. As for carrying on the family lineage, it would depend on how things would go, but for Chen Zhong, had he hadn't have a son-in-law who would marry into the family, he would end up a "*juehu qi'er*" in the village. Third, so far as Ji Village is concerned, for a woman to have a husband marrying into her family, her family sure is to "suffer a loss", because, generally speaking, her family has better conditions than the family of her male counterpart who generally has no conditions comparable to local young males' and who might even remain a bachelor. Fourth, the interviewee apparently identified with Chen Ying having a husband to provide for her father in old age, and at the same time sympathized with the practice to the extent that one could made do with it in passing the days. After asking him questions, I encouraged him also to continue his story about Chenying's suicide. He let out a sigh and went on.

> Chen Zhong himself was in a matrilocal marriage. His mother-in-law was his wife's maternal aunt, and his father-in-law was a man surnamed He. His mother-in-law and father-in-law, they, too, had been very unlucky, no son, not even a daughter, and so they had had but to adopt a child, a daughter given birth by his mother-in-law's sister; that is Chenzhong's wife. It turned out that Chen Zhong and his wife gave birth to three children, none of them being a son. They could but find anybody who wanted to enter into a matrilocal marriage with their daughters. This son-in-law's father, surnamed Jing, was an idle, dissipated good-for-nothing despite poor family conditions, but he had two sons, which gave him much superiority. Jing often bad-mouthed Chen Zhong after drinking, like 'Look at the He family, they had failed to retain their own property which was later in the hands of the Chen family. And now the Chen family also has failed to keep it, and it is in mine - the Jing family's - possession.' Not only was Jing vocal about Chen Zhong, he also took advantage of Chenzhong. For example, he always asked Chen Zhong to guarantee the money that he borrowed to sustain his indulgence in dissipation. He always felt, like, no matter how many '*luohannüs*' you have, you're not a patch on me having '*dianjiaoer*s'.[3] Though I'm an idler, I have sons anyway, and in the event of a fight, my sons together, even if they were '*dianjiaoer*s', are sure to beat you to death. Your '*luohannüs*' standing there in a row, except that they're good-looking, what else could they do? You have everything but a son, and in the end, everything you have are in my hands. What else could you do? So he dared to borrow money and spend it indiscriminately, all this at Chen Zhong's expense. Chen Zhong clearly knew that it was unfair, but blamed it all on himself having not a son and swallowed it; nor did his wife dare to speak of it. Chen Ying certainly felt aggrieved but was unable to divorce her husband, because, as I said just now, her father was a *juehuqi'er* and she could not see him uncared for in old age. But she could not reconcile herself to it, and no one knows how many quarrels she had with her husband. And after the last quarrel, she killed herself by drinking pesticide. Death ends all one's troubles; one sees nothing and feels no pain.

I went on to asked him how the Chen family reacted upon Chen Ying's death, and I briefly mentioned the *darenming* phenomenon I discovered in a survey in Feng Village so that he could give a comparative description. He said:

> In this place, generally speaking, when one dies, it is believed that the deceased is 'fated to die that way', and if it is not because of the 'fate', how would a living one commit suicide? Besides, you drink the pesticide yourself, not forced to drink it, right? So, nothing particular happened upon Chen Ying's death. From the very beginning, the Chen family had little influence, because Chen Zhong himself had been in a matrilocal marriage, but Jing had a big family. As for *darenming* or funeral disturbance that you mentioned just now, they (the Chen family) didn't dare to do it, nor could they raise it, unless they were quite powerful - and in that case, they would at least go and ask an explanation form the Jiang family. But the Chen family had none of these conditions, and at last they could but be resigned to her death.

Apparently, Teacher Fang implied that the root cause of the tragedy was the fact that Chen Zhong had no son. As a matter of fact, however, behind his sigh over the fate of Chen Zhong was suggested a cultural message—exactly what does a "son" mean the people of Ji Village? At the same time, we could also find this suicide's similarity to and difference from what I learned from my field research in Feng Village among other tight-knit societies: the similarity is that they all had superstitious beliefs, and the difference is that there didn't occur such a violent action of private enforcement as *darenming* resulting from the belief that the victim was forced by related persons to commit suicide. By comparison, therefore, the Ji Village suicide has far less violent repercussions than did those in places like Feng Village.

When I was about to continue the interview, his wife walked in and invited me to have launch at their home. I took a look at the time and it was already launch time. So I had to end the interview, and declined their warm launch invitation. And I said that I would still come and visit him in a few days and, as if "giving him an assignment" to him, I said that next time I would only ask him about suicide, all cases of suicide that had occurred in Ji Village in the past 30 years or even longer. He readily agreed.

On the way back for launch, I chuckled to myself because, as it is not that easy to find, in rural surveys, a person to be interviewed who is a conversationalist and who is quite informed about a subject and good at analysis, I happened to find such a person for my first interview.

Several days after this interview, I heard more people talk about Chen Ying's suicide but there were always some details not very definite. I wanted very much to go and talk with Chen Zhong and his wife, but I was repeatedly dissuaded by the village officials who said that the Chen family had just come out of the pain of losing their daughter and would, once one spoke to them of Chen Ying, cry and come unglued, because in their hearts they admitted that it was mainly they who were to blame for her suicide. At last, they introduced me to Chen Ying's birth father's older brother, Chen Qi, a simple and honest primary school teacher, who nevertheless was very good at talking. His wife listened beside during the interview. Given the sensitivity of the subject, I habitually started by asking about such things as local manners and customs which are of no importance to them but which are crucial to a researcher, as well as things that they are interested in and even proud of, like their children's education, employment and marriage. After noticing that they had already gotten quite relaxed as the interview was proceeding, I smoothly changed the topics to the issue of suicide. But, in the beginning, they simply smiled and denied it, and then said it was no use to ask about it. I came straight to the point, saying that I was sure about it because I had been here for several days and heard many say that a lot of people had committed suicide. They asked me what suicides I had heard of, and I responded directly that a young woman named Chen Ying had committed suicide by drinking pesticide not long before. After a brief engagement this way, he laughed frankly and asked how I had known it, and I said I simply had asked someone randomly, who then had talked about it to me. He then questioned who it was that had talked about it to me, and I answered that I had heard about it on the roadside and not asked the name of the person who had talked to me. I encouraged him to speak boldly, and told him about the purpose of my research to possibly assuage his

misgivings. After a dozen minutes of persuasion, he let out a deep sigh and began talking about it.

> She had a hard and poor lot. Honestly, she was my fourth younger brother's daughter, my niece. At 27 she died, leaving a child, who was under three years old at the time. (I suddenly felt that I was somewhat 'cruel', and so I consoled him by saying that the topic could be dropped if he felt it hard to talk about it. He said that it was all right to talk with me about it since I had known about it.) Had my brother had a son, Xiaoying (Chen Ying) would have not ended up that way. Alas, that's her fate.

These were his opening words, the point of which is similar to that of what Teacher Fang had spoken in the beginning. And it is simply that both interviewees might have different attitudes: the former as the victim's uncle showed more sorrow and sympathy, while the latter as an average neighbor of the victim's responded more by giving an objective account of the event and suggesting his own bliss by contrast. Both men shared one point—that is, that Chen Zhong had no son was fundamental to Chen Ying's suicide, otherwise they would touch upon this background at the very beginning. In fact, all persons that I interviewed during my several-day stay there mentioned this point with a sigh. After a brief pause, he continued.

> Xiaoying was mainly in conflict with her father-in-law, and because of this, there arose conflict between her and her husband who was subservient to his father. Because of having no son, my brother had had no choice but to find a son-in-law who would marrying into his family - a practice here we call "*zhaofu yanglao*" (getting a husband to support one's parents in old age) - so that they could have someone to care for them in old age and, were a male baby born, have a descendant to carry on the family lineage. This would turn out to be a disaster to Xiaoying. She actually disagreed, and we all tried to persuade her into accepting this grievance on the grounds that she should be considerate towards her parents having no son. Villagers think it very important to have a son. You must have a son and, if not, find one (son-in-law), who, though unable to replace a son, could at least care for you when you are old, - that is one you could rely on for helping you through old age. After a lot of persuasion, Xiaoying agreed to it, but it was a bitter pill for her to swallow. Things got better after she gave birth to a baby, a boy, and she appeared to live a normal life. But Xiaoying couldn't get on well with her father-in-law, she disapproved of his way of life. Like my brother, she simply wanted to live down-to-earth, to live an ordinary life. But her father-in-law was a loafer, and he lived an immoral life, liking to go and visit prostitutes in the county town despite his old age. And he never did anything earnest and lived on borrowings all day long. Every time he borrowed money, he always asked my brother to pay for him, justifying it on the grounds that he had handed his son to the Chen family. My brother didn't like Xiaoying's father-in-law, either. My brother was honest and sincere, while his son-in-law's father was boastful and dissipated. But nothing he could do, just because of having no son. As for her suicide, Xiaoying resented her son-in-law's way of life, on the one hand, because living here, she often heard others gossip about it, making her feel quite aggrieved. And so she sometimes quarreled with her father-in-law over it. Her husband, not only did he console her, he beat her often for these things. On the other hand, there were specific things that led her to drink pesticide. Her husband also had an older brother who was a truck driver in the county town and, like her father-in-law, liked visiting prostitutes, because of which he was divorced by his wife, despite having two children. Her husband was often asked by his older brother to go and help him, who was quite busy as a truck driver. It turned out that her husband helped his older brother all day long, having no time to look after the family here, and what's more, he received no money for his work all the year round. Therefore, Xiaoying was also quite furious at this, and she also

feared that he would visit prostitutes as did his older brother and father. Over these things the couple often quarreled also. When her husband’s older brother once again asked him to go and help on the 28th day of the 12th lunar month of 2008, Xiaoying disagreed with him on the grounds that she feared he might meet with mishap outside given that it was soon to celebrate the New Year, on the one hand, and that she feared possible conflicts since he had never been given a penny for his help all the year around. But her husband was determined to go, and so the couple quarreled and he gave her a beating. She was infuriated but said nothing at the time. But her father-in-law, upon hearing about it, came over and shouted all kinds of swear words at her, and threatened that he was capable of killing the Chen family. My brother wasn’t at home that day. Xiaoying’s mother, who was being on the scene, felt it so unfair to her daughter got into a quarrel with Xiaoying's father-in-law. While her mother was quarreling with her father-in-law over there, here Xiaoying’s husband gave her several slaps across the face. No woman could stand it. It was soon to celebrate the New Year and she was so wronged. She had disapproved this marriage, but after giving birth to her child, she was resigned to it. But what a life was she living now? When my brother returned home next day, neither she nor her mother told him about what had happened the day before. And so he was kept in the dark about it. Actually, even if he had known about it, there would be nothing that he could do. He could not ask the child to get a divorce, right? Divorce would be disgraceful, and besides, he had no son and had at last found a son-in-law marrying into his family. Then there came the New Year's Eve, followed by the Spring Festival. Xiaoying was so thoughtful that she worried that had she told her father, he would go and argue, and in that case, there would not be a happy Spring Festival in the family. But her anger had never subsided. On the eighth day of the first lunar month, my brother and his wife went to visit relatives, leaving Xiaoying at home with her child. Presumably she could not think up anything better than death, and so she drank pesticide. Immediately after drinking it, she regretted it, and she called her husband’s older brother, who, I said just now, had a truck, asking him to rush her to the hospital and adding that she had drunk pesticide. Very soon everybody knew about it, and I went with them too. I asked her why she did that silly thing, and she replied that she saw no hopes in her life and it was better for her to die so that she would then be aware of nothing and be freed.

Teacher Chen said the above without a break. While he had been speaking, I had taken notes quickly and thought about basic information. As for specific things about or the direct cause of Chen Ying’s suicide, many things did really matter, and they were but links the chain driving her to commit suicide. If we sum things up take into account what Teacher Fang spoke, we would find that the suicide of Chen Ying had been foreshadowed by the fact that her father had no son. Many other suicide stories are in essence all about a life built on this core word “son”, and a complete “son”-focused rules system. I went on to ask Chen Qi (Teacher Chen) about the rescue of Chen Ying and what happened in the aftermath of her death, to conclude this suicide story. He let out several deep sighs and kept on.

She was rushed to the township health center. It was a 20-minute drive from here to the health center. At that time, Xiaoying was quite conscious, and she got off the vehicle and walked in all by herself, without asking us to support her. Arrangements were immediately made for stomach pumping. We also brought the bottle of the pesticide that she had drunk. Health center works took a look at the bottle and appeared puzzled and let us phone the manufacturer of the pesticide to ask if there was an antidote to pesticide poisoning. The manufacturer answered the phone and asked us to search the Internet for information that they said had all published online, and then hung up. My goodness, we were all farmers and knew little about how to use the Internet. We had but to make phone calls to find someone who knew how to search online. Such a person was found, who then searched but called back saying

> that information published online indicated there was no especially efficacious antidote and a poisoned person must be treated as appropriate by a hospital. Alas, time had thus been wasted. And it was cold, and she lay on a bed and began receiving the stomach pumping treatment. An hour passed and the procedure continued on. I found that it was of no use, and if it continued, she would either die from the procedure or from cold. The head of the health center appeared, took a look, and said that the person was dying and must immediately be transferred to another hospital. At once I got so furious that I shouted curses at the head. If you were unable to treat her, you should have told us early, and it is too late when you tell us to transfer the patient - it takes about an hour to drive from the health center to the county hospital. So we had to drive her to the county town and at this point she was already dying. When we finally sent her to the county hospital, doctors there said that it was too late and had she been sent there ten minutes earlier should would be saved. And thus we watched her die." "After she died, we drove her back. Poor woman, she was fated to die this way, otherwise she could not always have been unlucky. She died, and it was fact. What could you do? You could not kill her father-in-law, and except for swearing at, nothing could be done. In this way she died.

When he was finishing the last line, he was already in tears. I had been listening attentively, feeling as if I were watching a film in which a life was dying away in an hour while he was speaking. We had tea for a while, and seeing him calm down, I asked him about persons who had committed suicide.

Having no son could be said to have foreshadowed the suicide of Chen Ying, and what I also contemplated is exactly what role women play in Ji Village. After a period of surveys, I always felt that I could not their position in the village, which was quite different from my fieldwork in tight-knit societies like Feng Village. Though we say that a tight-knit society is a patriarchally strong society, women living therein still have a position, especially daughters before their marriage who still have their position in paternal villages. In tight-knit societies, therefore, we have found that suicide is mainly among married young women while there are relatively few suicides among unmarried women in real paternal villages despite arrange marriage among other similar reasons. I later came into contact in Ji Village with relatives of suicide victims, dead and not dead, who told me much about suicides in the village, allowing me to have a deeper understanding of suicide among young people in this type of society.

Chen Ying's suicide I categorize it as an affective suicide of despair. While her suicide appears to have been directly caused by a series of conflict that resulted from her not allowing her husband to go and help his older brother, in actual fact she had been affectively unsatisfied. As a woman, she had no place in a village like Ji Village, she was but what her father saw as a temporary substitute for a son. And in a cultural sense, the birth of her son proclaimed that her mission had been basically completed, and what was left of her was simply to support her parents through old age. But almost none was willing to understand her affective anxiety and pain as a young woman, and she was imbued with the idea that "Your (Chen Ying's) father is already a *juehuqi'er* and you cannot be so hard-hearted as to see them (her parents) uncared for in old age". In other words, Chen Zhong's image as a *juehuqi'er* had just been formed by the fact that Chen Ying was not their son, and so Chen Ying as a woman was supposed to relieve, by fulfilling the task of getting a husband to support her parents in old age, the cultural pain that she being not a son caused to the family and even the whole clan. And in this sense, Chen Zhong was a victim, too. He had no son and, if unable to find a son-in-law willing to marry into his family, would have felt it not different to live and to die from suicide. The force behind this was far from the logic of "passing the days" (Wu 2009), and though Chen Ying committed suicide after feeling it meaningless to pass her days—however hard she put up with it, the underlying mechanism lies apparently not in passing the days per se, which I will discuss in detail in later chapters. Below is a case of suicide of a young woman over love frustration.

**Case 3.2**

Fengzi, female, unmarried, drank pesticide and died in 1991, at the age of 19.

As my survey was drawing to a close, I went and talked with her relatives specifically about her suicide, rather than directly asking her parents about it—because I felt that I would really be cruel to them if I did. To be honest, this was my biggest mental burden in conducting field research in tight-knit societies and loose-knit societies. And I was also infected by such atmosphere, so much that at night I even waked up suddenly from a nightmare, feeling as if the persons who died by suicide had been outside of my window, hair disheveled, pouring out their agonies to me. So I often idealistically urged my parents far away back at home to frequently go and burn joss sticks on my behalf. In the next chapter, to the contrary, what I will discuss about individualistic societies is different: my surveys conducted there were quite relaxing, and except that I felt shocked and even wanted to escape in the beginning when hearing about a large number of old people having committed suicide, I even went so far as to get as numb as my interviewees when they talked to me about the suicides of old people in a relaxing, humorous manner. It was just those most intuitive feelings that drove me to decide to think over the issue of suicide in rural China from the perspective of differences between suicide types and even between regions.

The first person that I turned to was Fengzi's younger sister, a cadre in the village who was in her thirties. After giving a brief account of the case, she showed unwillingness to talk about her older sister's death. At this point her mother-in-law came in and appeared quite interested in the topic. From her account, I learned that Fengzi died by suicide in despair over a marriage arrangement by her parents, a type of suicide which we have discussed—affective suicide of despair. While we were talking, a woman in her sixties came in, who somewhat looked like Fengzi's younger sister. I thought her likely to be someone dropping in, but I was not sure of it, and so I continued the interview. After listening for minutes and probably being aware of what I was asking about, this old woman interrupted me and said in angry, "What is the use of you asking about this? Since the person is dead, why are you still asking about it?" While I was astonished by her interruption that was abrupt and that probably I had expected, I asked who she was, politely. "She is my mother," the suicide victim's younger sister beside said to me, and at once I apologized to her and explained the purpose of my inquiry. Her daughter also turned around and said to her that I did it for research purposes and wanted to help more people so that they would not commit suicide as did her sister, and that I had no ill intentions (In Ji Village, talking about such things at will would cause you trouble as people would think you are making mischief). I further explained to her that it was painful for me, too, to ask them those questions, that it was when I asked about "*fenquanzi*"[4] that I had the sudden[5] thought of asking about that, and that had she felt it unbearable I would stop asking about it—though I still want her to tell me about it herself. After I said those words, she had a change of heart and, letting out a deep sign, began the story.

> I now don't suffer from it. I was pained so much at the time that I even wanted to go with her (committing suicide upon her death), and with that impulse subsiding, I was all right. I'm going to talk to you about it. Twenty years have passed, and rarely have I talked about it with others. Anyway, you are not a local, and so it doesn't matter that I tell it to you. She was destined to die that way, and it was her fate. Had she not died, I would have lived in comfort. She was quite able and helped me with a lot of things. If she were alive, I would have been spared from having to take medicine and go and work in the fields at so old an age. My lot has been a hard one - I have lost two daughters. My oldest daughter died at eight, from a penicillin injection, and my second oldest daughter, the one you asked about just now, died by drinking pesticide. Now I have only this youngest one, and she is not well. At the time, she (Fengzi) simply didn't like her groom-to-be and took her own life by drinking pesticide. My sister-in-law was

> the matchmaker, that is my husband’s sister. The engagement took place in April, and she died in September. Alas, it felt as if it had happened yesterday. She had simply been unwilling to marry him, very much unwilling. I said to her that should she really not want to marry the man, we would fail her aunt and uncle, and since we had promised them (the groom-to-be’s parents) that she was to marry him - no two ways about it, it was simply impossible for her not to marry him. But my daughter still refused to marry him, saying that if she were forced to marry him, she would see no hopes in life and she would rather die. We felt that she was just talking, and scolded her, saying that you would die a ghost of his family should you die. Later on, I sensed that there was something wrong with her, who shut herself in her room and spoke little. And I was quite worried that she might do something stupid. On the morning of the day she drank pesticide, I comforted her, saying, ‘If you really don’t want to marry him, just do as you want to, but don't embarrass your aunt so much as to make it hard for them to explain it away - after all they are the matchmaker.’ And I added, ‘If you are really unhappy with it, you first date him (Fengzi’s groom-to-be) for a while, and don’t be so impatient as to break off your engagement. And if you find it impossible to get along well with him in about half a year, do whatever you want.’ She agreed then, and said, ‘All right, I’ll date him for a while first.’ After speaking, she said she wanted to go to the fair. I agreed. Then she went alone. I was washing clothes at the riverside when she returned and called me. And she said she was back to the house first. None was inside the house at the time; her father went and worked in the field, and I was washing clothes outside. A while later, she came out and told me, ‘Mother, I’ve drunk the pesticide, dichlorvos, a bottle of it.’ I cried upon hearing it, and I had her rushed to the hospital. But it was too late, she drank too much of it. She died on the way to the hospital. She had a hard life It was her fate, and mine also, otherwise I would not have lost two of my three daughters.

I had thought that she had only three children—three daughters. When I further inquired about her family, she said that she also had two sons, who she said were useless and could only take care of their own families owing to heavy burdens. When I asked her if she had regretted it, she said:

> How could I not regret it? “I did regret it. But it is of no use. Had it occurred today, she would not have died. We were so bullheaded then. If it is now, we would not force her if she disagreed, and if we did force her, she would not think of death. I don’t know why young girls often drank pesticide in those days and few do so nowadays. But now there are more divorces. If you don't like somebody, you just refuse to marry them, and if you are married and want a divorce, you simply file for divorce. In recent years in particular, we have seen several couples here get divorced.

These words of hers conveyed an equally important message. It seems that being “destined to die that way” is not simply about one’s “fate”, and just like the “forced to choose to die” claims in tight-knit societies, constitutes a behavioral pattern of suicide or a mutual-construction pattern of suicide. This is because she mentioned that had her daughter lived in today’s environment, her daughter probably would not have committed suicide, and she and her husband would not have been that “bullheaded”, and even encourage “divorce”, let alone her daughter’s engagement—it would now simply be a break-off of the engagement, much easier than a divorce. When I continued to question her about the divorces she spoke of, she said had they (the women who were divorced) lived in her daughter’s time, they also might have committed suicide by drinking pesticide. Therefore, Fengzi’s suicide was apparently not destined but resulted from a particular social structure and environment. It is only that by comparison with the past, the structure now has relaxed a lot, which, nevertheless, remains a structure that breeds suicide, though not that massively.

As a matter of fact, that I have said that those young women have no place in a social structure like Ji Village is not unfounded, a point that can be proven by many cases of suicide, whether or not victims were dead. My landlady gave me a brief account of the suicide of her niece, which had not occurred in Ji Village where I was conducting surveys, but in a neighboring village that has the same structure, culture.

**Case 3.3**

> She was my younger brother's daughter, my maternal niece, who took her own life by drinking rat poison. Alas, she was only 18 years old, so young an age. She had been in love with a man of a neighboring village, whom my brother and his wife both disapproved of. But she was very keen on him and determined to marry him, no matter what. In the beginning, my brother and his wife and dissuade her, and also scolded her; the considered that that man's house was too shabby and his village too poor. After finding it useless to dissuade her, my brother began to beat her, and his wife started to swear at her, using a language so coarse that my niece could not stand it. She had dignity, too, how could she stand being cursed that way? She always said to her mother, 'You as a mother are cursing me so harshly, so viciously, I find it no better for me to live than to die. If I died, I would be aware of nothing, and if ghosts are real, maybe I could be able to marry him after becoming a ghost.' Later she drank rat poison, quite a bit of it, and doctors were unable to save her.

I went on to ask her how they cursed their daughter, so much so that the victim wanted to die. She said it was very harsh to hear and she could in no way speak it. And she said her sister-in-law was particularly crude-mouthed, otherwise her niece would not have died. I requested her to repeated it so that I could understand the case better.

> She scolded my niece, 'You're a coquettish bitch. It's fucking all right for you to be coquettish at home, but you're going so far as to be coquettish in that fucking poor place.' My niece responded, 'You're cursing me so harshly, I'd better die.' And she continued on, 'If you want to die, you go and fucking die. It's better for you to die than to be coquettish in that poor place.' She had not thought that my niece would drink rat poison and did drink it." "After my niece died, my brother repented. When he was desperate to vent his anger, he noticed that that young man, my niece's boyfriend, who came to mourn her death. My brother gabbed him and said to him that my niece would not have died had he not seduced her. My brother demanded that the young man pay him RMB50,000 in compensation, otherwise he would go to his house for an explanation. Later, I and several other relatives persuaded him and said that he could not blame it all on the young man, and that he and his wife were also to blame - had they not stopped her that arbitrarily, my niece would not have died. We also said to the young man,' you'd been in love after all, she drank rat poison for being unable to see you, it's not easy for them to have raised her for 18 years, and you give them a sum in compensation.' Finally, a compromise was arrived at, and the young man gave them RMB5,000.

Many young women's suicide was closely related to their unfortunate marriage, where arranged marriage and parental interference in marriage had much greater gravity than in the united-society villages I had investigated. And this is why I felt that women here have no place in life, at least before they enter their middle-aged. Except some who thus died by suicide, many actually had attempted suicide. Laotong was one of them. Laotong was actually not very old; she was 56. She was quite a straightforward woman. Her second oldest daughter was born in the same year as I was, but already a mother of two. Perhaps because she saw that I was about of her daughter's age, after noticing me on several occasions ask about farmer suicide, she volunteered to tell me about her attempted suicide.

**Case 3.4**

I am simply not fond of my husband, and of course it doesn't matter now since I'm already a grandmother. And I just put up with passing the days. When my father wanted to marry me to him, I objected straight. He (her husband-to-be) was barely literate, and he was capable of nothing but laboring - something for which my father had taken a liking of him, considering that he had a big strength and thus was a good match. I loathed him being older than me, and every time I looked at him, I felt him much older than me. My father said that he's not much older, and only two years older than me. I persisted in objecting, and always felt him not easy on the eye. But my damn father was on good terms with my future father-in-law, with whom he often drank. After drinking their fine wine, my damn father forced me to marry into their family. We went on a blind date on the 10th day of the fourth lunar month and married on the 18th day of the 12th lunar month. You know what? After getting married, I asked him about his age and he told me that he was actually 28, eight years older than me. I was furious, and I hated my damn father. Not long afterwards I began quarreling with him, who always struck me with his hands and sometimes grabbed my hair and bumped my head against the wall. Every time he beat me, I ran back to my parents' home, and said to them that I would not live with him and I wanted a divorce. My father said that should I dare to divorce, he would beat me to death. He said that a divorce would ruin my reputation, and my parents' also. He said that if I divorced and ruined his family's reputation to the extent that his sons were unable to find a wife, I would answer for it. I said I didn't know what to do, but I really resented my damn man, and that I would not go back. My father then drove me out, saying that a daughter married is water poured out, it was not all right for me to live in my parents' home, and that I must hurry and go back. I said that I couldn't divorce, nor had I a liking for that man, I was back and he was driving me back, and that I had no choice but to die by drinking pesticide. My damn father responded that if I wanted to die, I couldn't die in the Tong family, I should die in the Jing family [her husband was surnamed Jing], and that I was alive being a Jing family member and was supposed to die a ghost of their family. Later on he threatened me straight, saying that if I didn't stop stirring up trouble, he would run away from home and would not care whether we (I and the rest of the family) would live or die. I also had an older brother, five younger brothers and a younger sister, plus me, my damn father and my mother, ten persons in all, and it was not easy for him to feed the ten mouths since at the time my younger brothers were too young to do anything. It is just because of this - he saw that my husband had an inexhaustible strength - that until then he still though very highly of his son-in-law. And my damn father got along well with my father-in-law, who had been quite generous to give my damn father RMB560 in bride price, so that he could not have been happier. Actually, everyone knew that he did it all for the benefit of his sons and didn't care at all what I as her daughter would suffer.

Laotong described fast how her misery had started, a backdrop which apparently is in essence the same as what we have learned before. I went on to ask her why she later had chosen to commit suicide. She continued telling her story. She sobbed in grief and then arose to get a wet towel, with which she wiped her tearful eyes. Apparently, my question conjured up her long-suppressed painful memories. Once again, I felt it cruel to continue on the topic; I had seen too many of my female interviewees crying so bitterly. I then proposed changing the topic, and she said that she was all right, it was simply sad to think of those damn things, and that she could continue. I said that I was really sorry about it. And so she went on.

Later I always wanted to die, and if I had not been sorry for my mother and my three children, I would have died many times. He was simply not the type to my liking. He sat on the *kang*, taking a look at him I would see no hope in life. It was simply not a life that I wanted, and so I want to die. In the days after I gave birth to my second child,

that is in my thirties - not long after land was allocated, I wanted most to die. My father-in-law was bad-tempered, and when I said I was to leave, he said that if I dare leave, he would break my legs on my damn father's behalf. My husband beat me frequently. I wanted to divorce but couldn't, I want to run away but couldn't either, and it was better for me to die, not matter what.

After each fight, I would send for my damn father to come over, hoping he would speak in my defense - they [her husband and father-in-law] had beaten me so bad I had bruises all over. But whenever he came, my father-in-law would prepare some fine dishes and take out his fine wine for my father. After drinking, my father would chastise me instead, and apologize to my father-in-law, saying that I had been badly behaved, and asking my father-in-law not to take me seriously.

Even if I went back [to her parents' home], he would not let me stay and turn me back. I held the bowl in my hand and cried and didn't eat. He didn't care, and insisted that I went back. I hated my damn father, who ruined me, and I still hate him up till now. After I came back, I simply resented seeing my husband. Whenever I saw his face, I felt resentful. I felt tolerably well when I didn't see him in the day when he went out to work, but when he came back and sat on the *kang*, I would become furious just looking at him. Then I would say nasty things, we would then quarrel and he would beat me up.

Once we had a row, and my second oldest daughter was 4 years old at the time,[6] he grabbed my hair, dragged me and hit my head against the wall. My head was covered in bumps, and blood gushed from my nose. And even then he didn't stop bumping my head. At noon, I didn't cook and I lay on the *kang*. He prepared the meal but didn't call me to eat. And seeing me not get up, he dumped all of it into the pig feeder.. I was livid, and thoughtt, this bastard, what a life he had given me, a life that had no point to it. No matter how long I lived on, it would not be the life that I wanted. As soon as he left the house again I grabbed a bottle of pesticide and began to drink, and after I had several mouthfuls of it, my second oldest daughter hugged my legs and cried, 'Mom, don't die, if you died, who could I rely on!' Looking at my poor child, I stopped drinking it and I cried also. I didn't drink too much of it, and I was saved.

After surviving that catastrophe, I began to ponder how to put up with my life since I was unable to divorce or run away. And I figured it out, and it was just a word, 'forbearance', - there are 24 hours in a day, whether you spend them happily or otherwise.

She then asked me if I had ever heard to a song called "*Ren Zi Gao*" (Wisdom in Forbearance). I didn't quite catch it and through she had said "Guo Degang", and I responded that I knew about him but didn't listen to his programs much. She then found a CD and played it for me. The title was "Ren Zi Gao". The lyrics went: "The character Ren is great, the top part of it is a knife. Grand Duke Jiang showed longanimity by engaging in fishing and managed to live to eighty years of age when he saved the dynasty… Li Bai was had not enough forbearance and indulged in fine wine and ended up drowning in the river; Zhou Yu had little forbearance and died at Baqiu, leaving Xiao Qiao behind.…

She said that she had been living by "*Ren Zi Gao*" and her life now could count as not bad. And there had been several things with which she could console herself. First, she later gave birth to a son, which she said was crucial to her life and brought her and her husband a "motivation" for a better life. After she gave birth to her oldest daughter, she said, her husband didn't show much unhappiness, and when her second oldest daughter was born, he bluntly didn't go out to work. And every time she urged him to go and work in the field, he would say "For what I work? Without a son, it will all belong to others even if I labor to death". But after her son was born, her husband didn't need to be urged and went out to work quite early, humming, and he didn't return until quite late, covered in sweat and mud, still humming. Second, with her two daughters married and having children, she said she felt ashamed, as a grandmother now, to quarrel anymore; in her words, "I'm so old now, and if I

still talking about getting a divorce, I would feel it disgraceful myself. No more quarrel. Just live this way." Besides, her son was grown-up and soon to reach the marriage age, and if she kept quarreling with her husband, she said it would ruin her son. Third, her husband now was no longer in charge of the household, and she felt that finally she as a woman was unable to give orders. Unlike days in the past, even if she had been put in charge of the household, she had been nothing more than "a passing god of wealth", and "in effect, his storekeeper". "It is different now. I am one of the most influential among a crowd of old women." "Now I don't want to die unless Heaven lets me die. And even if Heaven lets me die, I would plead to live for two more years." She laughed frankly.

Apparently, as these women became old, things improved, and their missions in life changed, their affective despair was at least temporarily suppressed. In Ji Village, middle-aged women are in effect no different than men—they are simply a crowd of men in the female body. Therefore, even in the case of suicide, their logic has changed, most often no longer based on affective despair that is typical of suicide among young people. The same is roughly true for Yu Village, which, as a village located in an area of the south-north transition, is less than Ji Village in terms of strength, I think. Laotong and Laodu are different in that the former gave birth to a son and has since then had a positive attitude towards life while the latter has lived a negative life because of having no son—working less and playing mahjong more in passing the days.

Young men have a similar suicide mechanism to that for young women: mainly despair over parental interference in their marriage. But, generally speaking, they have a slightly lower suicide rate than young women. Suicide among young people tends to have picked up in the past several years. But, on the whole, suicide is more common among young men over marital frustration, illness, family pressure. The basic logic behind suicide among young women remains largely unchanged.

From the classic cases of young woman suicide described above, we may make a preliminary summary.

By comparison with tight-knit societies, loose-knit societies have weaker—moderate, in my view—degree of kinship bonds and degree of regulatory control, but the two dimensions equally could interact to play quite a strong role. The strength of their degree of regulatory control system, by comparison, seems more prominent in contributing to the characteristics of suicide among young people, and so affective suicide of despair is more noticeable in them. But, in essence, this degree of regulatory control system is in itself inseparable from blood relationship. It is just because of this social characteristic shaped by two- or three-generation family unions in which males are centered, that people living in such a social structure still have a strong desire for males for various reasons, say, political struggle in villages, and if the scope of blood relationship is too small, that is having not enough males, individuals could hardly find a place in such a structure. On the dimension of this relationship, therefore, a birth culture is built on sons or males. So, young women living within this cope of degree of kinship bonds and degree of regulatory control system could hardly have their own living space, or position, whether in patriarchal villages or their husbands' villages. But if it is an uncivilized society or one not yet anointed with the idea of gender equality, perhaps there would be no problems, at least no widespread suicide among young women—especially those unmarried or just married, because they would accept the original structural system and believe that whatever happens to them, it is their fate.

After the founding of new China, a women's liberation movement unfolded unprecedentedly, playing an immeasurable role whether in tight-knit societies we described, loose-knit societies we have discussed in this chapter, or in individualistic societies that we are going to discuss in the next chapter. For the new-style women anointed with the women's liberation movement, the notion of gender equality had already imperceptibly taken root deep in them rather just burgeoning. Many of them gradually entered their life stage of marriage following the reform and opening up, at a time when the system disintegrated so that energy in people was much unleashed; and in the 1980s, young men and women started to pursue their own happiness and love. Tragedy lied in that many had

parents who had lived through the pre-liberation society, and that even if some parents were born in the early days of new China, they had been much affected by the previous society. Moreover, the loosing of the entire social structure was far from over; in the intense transformation of society, the released liberty and the constrained structural force were still in conflict with each other, and the transformation of the structure in itself even made this conflict much grimmer than ever.

The structural change in society is what lies beneath suicides among young people, whether men or women, who took their lives for romantic problems. To avoid any misunderstanding that might be caused by my words, I want to make it clear here that I am not blaming women's liberation or social liberation movements (though there is indeed an important connection). I prefer to state that rising suicide rates among young women are an inevitable occurrence during the movements. It can be said, in some sense, that it was the growing number of suicides among young women (and sometimes young men) in the 1980s that helped advance the liberation of young people which in turn caused a remarkable fall in suicide in the 1990s. However, the transformation of what is a loose-knit society is far from complete. As such, it is not difficult to understand that suicides among young men and women still existed and even showed signs of rebound after 2000. Such a change, however, would not last long. Although I reckon suicide may rise among young men who are at a disadvantage or face serious problems in marriage, a conspicuous rising trend, like what happened in the 1980s and the early 1990s, is unlikely.

## 4.2 Suicide Among Middle-Aged People in a Loose-Knit Society

Suicide among middle-aged people in loose-knit societies is different in mechanisms than in tight-knit societies and then suicide among young and old people inside of loose-knit societies. We have mentioned before that suicide in this age group is not quite significant in terms of gender, and is mainly egoistic suicide for evasion. But, in loose-knit societies, mechanisms for suicide among middle-aged people are, in essence, similar in some ways to those for suicide among young people.

Below, we will analyze several typical suicide cases.

**Case 3.5**

> Jiang Gang, male, aged 38, died of suicide by drinking pesticide on the 5th day of the first lunar month of 2008.

This is quite a typical suicide of a middle-aged man, which I categorize as a suicide of despair over value. In fact, Jing Gang's suicide also had a strong tinge of evasion, and if it were not because the "son" factor played a decisive role, I would classify it as an egoistic suicide for evasion. As usual, I interviewed many villagers who knew the victim very well. What they talked most frequently of his suicide was still that he "had no son"—a "deadly" fact in a loose-knit society like Ji Village.

> This man [Jing Gang] had no son, and all his children were girls. It is mainly because of this that he found it meaningless to live on and better to die.

So said my first interviewee beginning his account of Jiang Gang's suicide. I asked him why could having no son cause suicide and was it really so important to have a son?

> This is our rural custom, unlike you urban people. This matters in villages, and you must have a son as a villager. Though we farmers know, too, that males and females are equal, and that it is wrong to think males are more important than females, but it is still impossible to change the notion. Here in our place, it is impractical to not have a son. It is a custom. There must be a spiritual pillar for a family to pass the days, and the biggest spiritual pillar is nothing else, but a son. Whenever you imagine that when you get old, you have a son who also has his son or sons - that is, you feel you will have

> grandsons, great-grandsons, great-great-grandsons, you would feel energetic in working now, and that you have something to strive for. And you would think to yourself, 'I'm working so hard, the house I've built - so sturdy a *kang* [he gave his *kang* several pats] - has someone to inherit,' then you're energetic in working, right? Conversely, if you have no son, alright, what do you have to strive for since you have no spiritual pillar? And so, you would not work hard. You would have no purpose of working hard, right? However grand (your house is), and even if it's built with gold bricks, it would not be yours, and you're toiling for someone else. And it's useless, right? Therefore, you would not work hard, you would not think of how much you should work and how well you do it, and it's enough that you simply maintain the status quo.
>
> In the case of Jing Gang, his house was quite poor and he didn't work much, just putting up with his life. The three daughters would get married anyway, and even if he had a son-in-law marrying in his family, it was not his own son, right? And that means you gave your property to another family with a different surname. What's more, he was 38, not young any more, and probably unable to reproduce. And so, he saw no hope and he despaired and considered it better for him to drink pesticide and die.

I interrupted him deliberately, "There is a woman near their home who at 42 gave birth to a son, but why the Jings were unable to have one more child?"

> Just think, his oldest daughter was 18, his second oldest daughter 17, and the youngest one 7, what happened over the 10 years in between? They must have aborted many [children] so that their physical condition didn't allow them to have one more child, otherwise it would be deadly.

I contradicted him, "Chen Zhong had no son and he had a daughter in a matrilocal marriage. He lived as usual and did commit suicide, right?"

> Their situation was different. Chen Zhong had better family conditions, was quite able himself, and relatively speaking, and was not under as much stress as Jing Gang was. Not only did Jing Gang have no son - he was desperate for one, but he was not capable himself. For the same construction job, for example, people of just about his age could earn RMB120 a day, but he could only earn RMB50 to RMB60 a day, no matter how hard he worked, which stressed him out more. He often lamented about the fact he had neither a son nor his own capability to rely on, and life was in general going badly for him. Before he died by drinking pesticide, it had always been on his lips, saying that there was no point in living and wanted to die.

Apparently, Jing Gang's death actually resulted from two-facet pressure: huge values-related pressure from the that he had no son, and huge material pressure from difficulties in life. These two facets could be strongly felt in a loose-knit society by comparing with one's peers. This pressure is in itself enough to cause one to commit suicide, and while it is certainly a matter of accident who it is that may choose to commit suicide, rather stable structural factors behind are obvious. Noticing me taking notes in silence, my interviewee added an important statement.

> All suicide takes place, to my eye, when there is no way out. A worm would struggle to survive when step on it, not to mention a person. There is too much stress for one to be alive, and having no son can be crushing. And when there is this problem, that problem, this requiring money, that requiring money, one would feel it better to die early.

Though the interviewee was not the person of the suicide victim nor a relative of the suicide victim, his view of suicide as an individual living in the same structure and space,

provided much insight for us to make sense of the cause of the victim's suicide. Certainly, every suicide is caused by a direct event or reason prior to it. This is true for Jing Gang's suicide. Many persons that I interviewed mentioned that he committed suicide over a conflict concerning the birthday of his mother and mother-in-law. Below is quite a detailed account given by a neighbor who was on good terms with him.

> The fifth day [of the first lunar month] was his mother's 56th birthday, and it happened also to be the 56th birthday of his mother-in-law. He asked his wife to help his mother cook dinner, but his wife refused and said she would go and help her mother cook. He failed to persuade her, and then the couple had a quarrel. He felt it meaningless for him to live on, and then drank pesticide and died. As for this episode, our rule is that so long as you are in a patrilocal marriage. it is your family that matters more. Your [by 'your', the speaker referred to Jiangfang's wife's] parents' home still had people, and even if you didn't go and cook, many people there could cook, right? Jiang Gang had a younger brother whose wife was not on good terms with his mother. And he was dutiful son, and should his wife not help with cooking, his mother's birthday would be celebrated cheerlessly. So he felt unhappy. His mother-in-law had one son as well as three daughters, two of whom, together with their husbands, also went [to celebrate her birthday], so that there lacked no hand there. Besides, Jiang Gang's [financial] position was no good. His two sisters-in-law's husbands also went, and they had good conditions. We have a saying here that goes "If you are poor, no one cares about you even if you live downtown; if you are rich, you have relatives from afar even if you live deep in the mountain." Comparison with them made him feel more uncomfortable, otherwise he would not have insisted on his wife going and helping his mother cook dinner. But his insistence didn't work on his wife. You see, a man, a husband, it's a shame to live this way, right? Having no son already made him depressed, and this was worsened by poor family conditions. By custom, he wife was supposed to go and help his mother cook, but she insisted on going and cooking in her mother's home. He felt that since everything went against him, the best option for him was to die.

From this account, therefore, the direct cause of his suicide was actually not very much important. When the aforesaid values-related pressure and material pressure persisted for long, any accidental event could culminate in Jing Gang's suicide. It was also for this reason that he often talked of wanting to die and drinking pesticide, suggesting that under the shadow of these structural forces which he felt unable all his life to address, he actually had already planned to commit suicide. Though his mother's and mother-in-law's birthday happened on the same day, what truly tortured him was apparently related also to the fact that his two sisters-in-law's husbands and his mother-in-law's family had better conditions than his, which to him was also huge pressure. In such circumstances, he actually wanted his wife to be on his side and gave him strong psychological support. Unfortunately, that didn't happen, and as a result he committed suicide. Fundamentally speaking, this suicide could be categorized as a suicide of despair over value, and on the surface, could also be seen as a culmination of escaping values-related and material pressure with the intention of freeing oneself from suffering. But, just because the latter played simply an exacerbating rather than fundamental role in Jing Gang's suicide, we still classify it as a suicide of despair over value.

Unlike Jing Gang, another middle-aged man who committed suicide had three sons and, upon a quarrel with his mother, drank pesticide and died, as described below in Case 3.6.

**Case 3.6**

Bao Nian, male, died by suicide in the summer of 1997, at the age of 37.

Many Ji villagers when talking about Bao Nian's death thought of him "destined to die that way", or "why did he, given his age, take things so hard as to take his own life after

quarreling with his mother? He was most likely to be preoccupied by a pesticide ghost." This is how many villagers interpreted his suicide. Later on, I interviewed a middle-aged man who was on friendly terms with Bao Nian, and he gave me quite a faithful account of the victim's suicide.

> First of all, I also feel that he was destined to die that way, otherwise he would not have drunk pesticide. And his quarrel at the time with his mother was not quite a big matter.
>
> What matter? A very small matter. His mother sprayed her pear trees with pesticide, and he helped with it in the orchard. But he had something else to deal with, which was quite urgent. A while later, he said to his mother that he had to deal with the thing first and would come back to help her. Her mother didn't consent and asked him to finish the job before going and taking care of his business. He responded that his business was more important, that his whole family counted on him for making money, and that sometimes he felt so tired as to kill himself. And his mother said that he had to get alone, however tired he was. Thus, a quarrel broke out between the two, and moments later, he said that he didn't want to live anyhow, that he had early wanted to die, and that his mother need not spray the pesticide on pear trees and he would drink it to save trouble. His mother got angry, too, and said, 'Hurry and drink it and die if you want to. It was not expected that he really ran to a bottle and drank all of the pesticide that was left in it. His mother got anxious but had no strength enough to drag him who was determined not to move. She had to run to fetch help, and when she returned with helpers, found him already dead in the pear orchard.
>
> Admittedly, I don't think that this incident was doomed. He had mention to me, before his death, that he wanted to die. It was when we were playing cards. When we talked about marriage of children when they grew up, house construction and the like, he said that it was too heaven a burden for him to construct houses for his three children, that his wife was not well, nor was he, making it very hard for them to make money, and that he felt too huge stress that he wanted to die.
>
> His family condition was poor, his house was shabby. At home he relied on cultivating some pear trees, apple trees, chestnuts, and corns, for an income. He also went and did some odd jobs elsewhere, as far as Beijing, and in places not very far from home, mainly Tangshan, but earned but a meager income. Two of his three children were attending a junior high school, and the third one was a primary school student and soon to enter the junior high school. His burden at the time was really quite heavy. His suicide was presumably related largely to these things, otherwise he would not have drank pesticide after spoke angrily to him. For a man of his age, he was supposed to have that magnanimity.

Therefore, being "destined to die that way" is simply a way that people use to interpret a suicide action upon its action, and that villagers all use this point as the primary explanation suggests that it is partially justified in this social structure. This pattern of suicide even influences, to some extent, the type of suicide in this type of society. It is different from tight-knit societies where suicide victims are seen as "forced to choose to die". In other words, tight-knit societies are inclined to recognize such suicide as homicide. And as homicide is different in nature from suicide, it would cause *darenming* actions in tight-knit societies, which in return would be very like to encourage suicide sometimes. But in loose-knit societies, when a suicide victim is widely seen as "destined to die that way", the suicide was just more of a real suicide. And when people think thus, they put the blame largely on the person of the suicide victim, so that the related individual(s) need not bear much responsibility. It is just because of this reason that we will find that whether it is a young, a middle-aged, or an old individual (to be analyzed below) who committed suicide, the possibility that they committed suicide out of vengeance was quite small.

For middle-aged individuals, we could see, material pressure of wanting to live a better life is also quite big, in addition to values-related pressure of desiring to have a son. Such pressure, when excessive, could imperceptibly lead people to commit suicide as a response, and though circumstances differ widely form individual to individual, any individual would choose to do so when suffering considerate pressure or plight, so as there is still the overarching force of structure. Bao Nian's egoistic suicide for evasion resulted to a certain extent from such pressure mechanisms. Unlike Jing Gang, his suicide was caused not mainly by values-related pressure, but by material pressure. This point we can understand better from the suicide of the wife of Production Team Li in Case 3.7.

**Case 3.7**

The wife of Production Team Leader Li of the Li family in the south part of Yu Village, took her own life by drinking pesticide in the 7th lunar month of 1982, at the age of 45.

The direct cause of her suicide was about their oldest son's wedding. She drank pesticide and died on the first night their son's bride-to-be stayed in the house, because their house was small. According to Li, their family had five rooms in all, two big rooms and three small ones - the smaller two of which could only be used as a kitchen. One of the big rooms served as a hall, and the other was a bedroom. Li said that he had five sons and one daughter, and that his oldest son was 32 at the time, who was also the first to have gotten married.

After having lunch on that day, their daughter-in-law stayed for the night. In the evening, Li's wife was worried about how to arrange for the daughter-in-law's stay because the house was too small, and in discussing the matter, began quarreling with him. She argued that because the two bedrooms didn't even have a door, it was impossible for so many people to live in, and so asked Li to find some boards and make them a makeshift door lest everyone feel embarrassed. Li responded that he had no time, and because the production team had just planted some bamboos, had to go and watch over them lest they be stolen. His wife grumbled that the home was in such a mess but he still thought of nothing but public affairs. Li was actually anxious, too, and said in the quarrel that he would quit being in charge of the house and leave her in charge of it instead. After speaking those words, he got out of the house. When he returned at night, his wife had let the second and third oldest children sleep in someone else's house for the night, and the fourth, fifth and sixth oldest children were to share the room with the couple. He didn't find anything wrong before falling asleep. He was awakened at midnight by the crying of the fourth oldest child, and before he was about to scold, he smelled pesticide. He looked about and didn't find his wife. He asked the child where she had gone, and the child said that she had drunk pesticide in the kitchen. At one he fetched several people to rush her to a hospital in the county town, but she died on the way to the hospital.

Not many people from her parents' family attended her funeral. Her parents said some "unpleasant words", the gist of which was that their daughter was harassed to death by Li, and then whined that their daughter had died a miserable death and suffered much, and things like that. But no violence happened, and later on the matter was settled by leaving it unsettled. When they swore at him, Li responded that it was not his fault, but her parents' family's fault. His explanation was that no matter what, his wife should not have gone so far as to drink pesticide unless there was one possibility - that she had met a pesticide ghost. That pesticide ghost, he said, was not anyone else but the wife of her younger brother or her younger sister, both of whom had committed suicide by drinking pesticide two years before. He further argued that in his quarrel with his wife, he only said that he was tired of being in charge of the household and wanted to "lay down the burden" because of tremendous stress, but he did strike her. And, had he struck her, he would have been highly culpable [in her

death]. He believed, therefore, that his wife was “destined to die that way”, and that “it was fate, doomed.”

The suicide of Li’s wife is the same in the core mechanism as Bao Nian’s death. While Bao Nian committed suicide out of persistent fear and even evasion over the future marriage of his children, Li’s wife took her own life owing to tremendous pressure when really facing his son’s wedding. The problem she faced was that, while it had been quite easy for her as the sole adult woman in the family to deal with living space problems for the family of eight members—five sons, one daughter, and the couple—living in a house with five rooms (two kitchens, two bed rooms, and one hall), there was now one more woman—her oldest son’ bride-to-be and the cramped condition apparently could not be changed in a short time. She, who seemed to have been quite calm before, committed suicide on the very night the bride-to-be stayed in the house. I categorize her suicide as a egoistic suicide for evasion. Apart from the actual pressure, she faced another pressure—that is, her husband offered to her, probably seriously, charge of the household, which was a huge “burden” to Li himself and certainly no less of a huge burden to her. Therefore, both person sort of shirked: Li shirked by “laying down the burden” while his wife shirked by choosing to commit suicide rather than accept this huge “burden”. In real life, however, there are indeed a few who committed altruistic suicide because of overpressure, as in Case 3.8.

**Case 3.8**

The wife of Yu Sheng, of Yu Village, took her own life by drinking pesticide in the 4th lunar month of 2009, at the age of 48.

Yu had two children, a 28-year-old unmarried son who worked in South Korea, and a daughter who had gotten married and lived in their county town after her return from working in Japan. His wife had been suffering from a throat problem for quite a long time, and though she often took medicine and receive injections, the condition didn’t improve. On one of the first days of the 4th lunar month, Yu took her to a county hospital, where she was examined and was told not to receive examination results until afternoon. Their daughter asked them to have lunch at her home before obtaining examination results and returning home. Suspecting that she was likely to have developed esophageal cancer, and thus fearing to see examination results, she said to Yu that she was to go home first, and urged him to have meal there and then obtain examination results and return home. At the moment of parting, she straightened the front lower parts of his coat, and said affectionately that it was a bit cold and he should have worn more (According to Yu, his wife had not behaved so affectionately before, and at the time he only felt a big surprised but didn’t think much). In the afternoon, Yu returned to the hospital, where he received examination results and some prescribed medicine, and then he hastened back home. But he didn't see his wife. A neighbor told him that upon her return, his wife did not cook for herself, that she had lunch at this neighbor’s home, and that they chatted until five o’clock before she left. Yu initially thought she might have gone and play cards in some relative’s home, and so he rode his motorcycle to look for her, but in vain. He returned and asked that neighbor what they had chatted about, who told him that they had talked about her illness, saying that she felt she might have developed esophageal cancer, treatment of which she said was costly, and if that was the case she would become a burden to his son. This neighbor, also a woman, added that she had also consoled his wife for quite a while, and seeing her laugh, felt nothing wrong with her. Upon hearing this, Yu thought of his wife’s unusual act in the morning of straightening the lower parts of his coat. Feeling that something bad had happened to his wife, he fetched several neighbors to together look for her. It was not until it was getting dark, that in the tea garden on a rear mountain they found Yu’s wife lying on the ground under a tea tree, a pesticide bottle beside her, with a strong smell of pesticide around. Finding her already dead, Yu held her in arms and cried loudly.

Unlike many other middle-aged individuals who committed suicide for evasion, the suicide of Yu's wife, according to many I interviewed, must have been out of her consideration for reducing the burden to the family and not encumbering it. They judged so for three reasons. First, the victim talked in the afternoon of the day she committed suicide, about her fears for encumbering her sons, and those words, which seemed insignificant or meaningless at usual times, could prompt many associations following her death. Second, the victim would not have to choose to die in the tea garden on the mountain if not out of altruistic considerations. Her choice of the position, in the eyes of many interviewees, was just because her family's house had newly been constructed for her sons to live in when married, and had she drank pesticide and died in the home, that would have been ominous for the family. Therefore, she chose to die outside in favor of the family, though that could leave her soul adrift forever. And, third, Yu and his wife had loved one another deeply, which was mentioned by those who knew the couple very well; according to those people, Yu even seemed to be a henpecked man in outsiders' eyes, his wife had been a diligent woman, the coupled had lived harmoniously, and in a very long time after her death, Yu looked grieved and sorrowful. It was also because of these reasons, that her parents' family, while they grieved her death, they were quite understanding towards Yu and even felt sorry that her death left him unaccompanied in life. After his wife's death, Yu kept close relations with her parents, visiting them at the major three festivals of the year and attending their birthdays and other important occasions.

So far as objective family situations are concerned, Yu's family didn't have huge values-related pressure that Jing Gang had for having no son, nor huge material pressure that Bao Nian and Li's wife faced as a result of family poverty. The tragedy of Yu's family resulted from his wife's illness. When his wife felt that her illness, if treated, could hardly be cured on the one hand, and would cost the family a lot of money, she thought of her unmarried son—had the family spent all their savings on treatment of her illness, that would probably put her son at a disadvantage. This, in effect, was still material pressure that resulted from her illness. Such pressure also could lead to egoistic suicide for evasion or for escape from suffering, but the suicide of Yu's wife suggests that her choice of suicide was made out of altruistic considerations, and it is classified as an altruistic suicide to reduce burden.

All such pressures actually come from social comparisons that people make in their daily lives. Social comparison and social competition differ considerably, the former meant to evaluate the self and the latter to evaluate others by means of comparison with others. In this context, social comparison and social competition point to opposite directions. Social comparison exerts a force mainly inward, or in other words the self, while social competition exerts a force mostly outward, namely on others. When an individual exerts a force on the self, it is liable to create tremendous pressure, which, when reaching a certain degree (depending on the individual's ability to resist pressure), would cause the individual to commit suicide. We often say, "Comparison kills." The person thus "killed" is not the one that we compare with, but who makes the comparison—that is ourselves. Social competition, however, when exerting a force outward, may not certainly lead to "suicide" but is very likely to cause conflict and even confrontation between people, with the purpose usually of winning against rivals; in extreme terms, therefore, social competition is liable to cause "homicide". As for the structure of a loose-knit society, the scope of blood relationship, generally within two or three generations, is very likely to lead to strong social comparisons because this type of society doesn't disintegrate completely. It is not like an individualistic society where people generally don't compare with one another but are engaged in fierce social competition. Nor is it like a tight-knit society where blood relationship might extend to the whole clan so that individuals are not that important and all live in the collective of the clan.

But, once social comparisons occur, it is for the most part the middle-aged who make such comparisons and bear the pressure resulting therefrom, because they, who, just in the middle phases of their lives, are relatively mature in various respects, but who are not as childish as the young on the one hand, and on the other not as detached as the old, are most

likely to be sensitive to social comparisons. As we have described, if such kinship bond is as strong enough, as in tight-knit societies, the pressure that results from social comparisons—including values-related pressure and material pressure—would cause altruistic suicide. In fact, such suicides also occur in loose-knit societies, though small in number. But, when such kinship bond is neither too strong nor too weak—that is, moderate, tremendous pressure from social comparisons would lead to a large number of egoistic suicides for evasion. Similar suicides can also be found in tight-knit societies, as we have discussed in the preceding chapter. In loose-knit societies that this chapter is focused on, the degree of kinship bonds, which is moderate, makes it more likely to lead to egoistic suicides for evasion. Egoistic suicide for evasion occurs largely among middle-aged people owing to the particularity that they have in their life cycles—they bear the largest part of tremendous pressure from values and materials.

On the whole, the rate of suicide among middle-aged people is rather stable despite a drop over the latest ten years—which is not as significant as the decrease in the rate of suicide among young people. This indicates that in loose-knit societies, pressure that middle-aged people face has not obviously lowered over the latest ten years—they are still under huge pressure in respects of wanting to have sons, constructing houses, marriage for their sons, financial conditions of their families. What is fairly optimistic is that among young people, especially those born in the 1980s and after, there has been a downward trend in social comparisons with their village peers as they move out of their villages for working elsewhere among various other reasons, alongside a rapidly decreasing overarching pressure on them from inside their villages—which their fathers suffered. Therefore, perhaps 10 or 20 years later, as these young people enter middle-aged, there may be a significant increase in the rate of suicide among them.

## 4.3 Suicide Among Old People in a Loose-Knit Society

Below We will examine a typical case of suicide by which to look into how suicide of despair over survival problems occurs among old people.

**Case 3.9**

> Hou Qianliang drank pesticide and died in 2009, at the age of 76. His wife passed away 20 years ago.

Hou Qianliang’s suicide could be said to be the most convincing and typical of all suicide cases that I have investigated in spit societies, and in a sense, we could say that if we understand his suicide, we could fathom the vast majority of suicides, especially suicide of despair over survival problems, with middle-aged and old people in loose-knit societies. I was shocked by this case also because it let me feel that it seems that nothing could be done to stop more and more old people from taking a path to suicide. When talking about Hou’s suicide, many villagers felt sorry for him and at the same time began to fear, especially those with several children, undoubtedly that they themselves, when they got old, or those in old age, might tread the same path as did Hou. While many said that they really could “not understand” his death because “he should not have died”, many also stated, contradictorily, that they were able to “understand” for “that is likely to be the ‘manners of the time’ going forward”.

> Hou Qianliang committed suicide because he had not been provided for by his sons and daughters, and by rules here in our place, especially not by his sons - because here, daughters have no obligation to provide for their parents, and it is their husbands’ parents that they are supposed to provide for.

An interviewee remarked so in the beginning of the interview. Therefore, what Hou’s death could boil down to the fact that his sons had not provided for him.

> He had 8 children, among them 6 sons and 2 daughters. Therefore, his death caused a big splash, and we often talked about it, with many villagers getting convinced that more sons would foreshadow more misfortunes.
>
> He needed to be provided for by his sons because he was largely incapacitated by old age. Otherwise, by custom for now, one would not need to be supported by his sons so long as he is able to move.

This was a double-faceted piece of background information given by the same interviewee, namely Chen Qi—older brother of Chen Ying's birth father, when I asked him about Hou's suicide. On the one hand, having more sons might instead cause elderly care problems. It is not hard for one with even a bit of experience or knowledge about rural life to speculate that the free-rider problem with the sons may leave their parents uncared for by none of them and finally result in their parents' suicide. On the other hand, Hou, basically incapacitated, had the strongest desire for being supported. As for what the interviewee framed—one would not need to be supported by his sons so long as he is able to move, it indicates that Hou had no alternative but to be provided for, and that probably he had no alternative but to commit suicide.

> The old man [Hou] relied mainly on his youngest son for his elderly care, but with whom he was unable to get on. So, he had to live alone, taking care of himself, but shared a courtyard with this son. Hou had a sum of money to be paid in compensation for his land and old house acquired to make room for an expressway to be built. When the town send personnel to allocate money in the village, the youngest son went and received his father's share on his behalf and possessed it. Hou asked the youngest son to give the sum back to him because his other sons had not their shares of the sum and he also needed money for supporting himself, but the youngest son refused to hand it over to him. The father and son quarreled, and then the old man got so indignant that drank pesticide and died.

The direct cause of Hou's death, therefore, was related to that sum of money received for his land occupied to make room for an expressway, in which the person who took center stage was his youngest son with whom a conflict broke out. In other words, we could boil the aforesaid conflict between Hou and his six sons which resulted in his suicide down to a conflict that occurred between him and his youngest son and finally lead to his suicide. Certainly, Hou's other sons must have been involved around the latter conflict, otherwise he would not have been determined to ask his youngest son for the compensation. Another message was that the youngest son was indeed not quite a "dutiful" son, otherwise he would not have allowed a basically incapacitated father to share the same roof but live alone—something which a good son would not allow to happen.

> On the night before Hou drank pesticide, his youngest son ["Laoliu" below as this son was called for being the sixth son of Hou] dropped into my house. I worked on Laoliu, who agreed that he would take good care of his father but on the condition that his father would not ask him for that money. But he feared that his brothers would ask to share that money with him, and I said to him that I was to talk to them. That very night I went and passed on Laoliu's plan to all his brothers, whom I advised to forgo that money and give it to Laoliu who would take up full responsibility for the care of their father, and who all agreed. And then I returned and said to Laoliu, 'You go back and talk about it with your wife, and if your wife agrees, I will put you six brothers together to have the matter decided.' In this way I worked on him until it was past 11 o'clock. And when I showing him off, I urged him to have a good talk with his wife about the matter and reply to me in two days so that I could continue to work on his brothers. The next day I went to work in my school, and about noon, I received a call saying that Hou had drunk pesticide and died. Upon hearing the news, I pondered if I

had acted too late - had I intervened two days earlier, Hou might have not drunk pesticide. And I thought if I had not done the work well so that Laoliu, after getting back to him home that night, had not only not solved the problem, but he had quarreled with his father, leading to the latter drinking pesticide. I also felt very sorry at the time. I returned from school at noon, and I directly went and asked Laoliu about how it had happened. According to Laoliu, he had gone to bed after getting back home that night, without talking about it with his wife, intending to talk about it the next day. The next morning, he said, his wife didn't notice Hou get out the room and then asked his child (Hou's grandson) and go and take a look. And it turned out that his father had already been dead in the room, still foaming at the mouth, with a smell of pesticide permeating the room.

Obviously, we could see, in continuing our explanation above, that while it was a conflict that occurred between Laoliu and the victim, all his brothers were actually present as a shadow-like force. We could also find, at the same time, that Laoliu's wife was presumably quite a formidable "role", otherwise Chen Qi would not have repeatedly urged Laoliu to have a good talk with his wife about the matter. In fact, according to Chen Qi, Laoliu's wife was a very formidable "master", and without her giving a nod of approval, talking to Laoliu was tantamount to saying nothing. Chen Qi was willing to mediate because he felt Hou really pathetic and he had a premonition that had he not offered to help, something unfortunate might happen. And what's more, as a fellow villager he felt obliged to do what he could to help the old man, and his mediation, in his eyes, played a "life-saving" role, though, unfortunately, the tragedy occurred anyway. What exactly was the amount of money that may have caused Hou to commit suicide, and how it played havoc with the family so that the suicide ensued? Were there any other events, apart from the amount of money, that could give us some insights in the run-up to Hou's suicide?

It was not an isolated matter that led to his (Hou's) suicide. Before this expressway-related matter, in fact, there had been several disputes in their family over dividing up family property, in which township and village leaders had tried in vain to mediate. And now there came this sum of money in compensation for the land and house requisitioned for the expressway construction, which exacerbated the situation. All the brothers want as big a share of the money as possible, but none was willing to provide for their father. When it comes to dividing up the money and family property, all scrambled for more, and when it comes to providing for their father, all dodged their responsibility. Hou's wife had died more than 20 years earlier, and he brought up all eight children by himself. He had built houses for them and found wives for his sons. And after having done all these things, he had gotten old, frail, and ill. Whenever he thought of all this, he felt bitter. And so did we. The compensation for the land and crops occupied for expressway construction totaled more than RMB70,000. The house had been valued at RMB90,000, but the money had not been disbursed. After Laoliu had claimed the RMB70,000, his second, third, fourth and fifth oldest brothers demanded a share of it. The eldest son, who was in a matrilocal marriage and who had no obligation [to support his father], didn't openly make demand but still wanted a share. His wife did most o the talking on this behalf.

Back in 2008, before construction of the expressway commenced, Hou, unable to take care of himself for illness but left uncared for by his sons, was so indignant that sued his sons except the oldest and the fourth oldest - the oldest son, who is in a matrilocal marriage, hadn't received much from his father-in-law, and the fourth son, who not until in his fifties, had married a woman a few years older than him, had not received much from his father, either. All the other sons had more or less obtained something from their father. But they four always grumbled that their father had not divided the property evenly. The most unhappy of them were the fifth son and Laoliu, who had actually received the largest share. The fifth son had received the largest

number of rooms but was unwilling to support Hou. The second and third sons, who had received less, refused to provide for Hou because the fifth son was unwilling - ‘you have received that much but don’t support him, on what grounds do you want us, who have received less, to support him?’ Laoliu, though he had received no less from Hou, also refused to provide for him on the grounds that the second and third oldest sons should have provided for him, not the youngest one. Actually, these sons of his were real bastards. None of their families were poor, and it would have been easy for them to give something to Hou. But none of them did, leaving their father destitute. After the suit was filed, the court didn't handle it properly, and they send people to mediate between the brothers, who made promises at the time but who did not make good on the promises. Had the court enforced the ruling and monitored the sons, Hou would not have gone so far as to commit suicide. I have a very low opinion of this, they (the court] were also to blame.

One day before his death, Hou came to my home, and he sat at my gate shedding tears. I knew that he wanted me to help him work on his sons. I invited him to come into the house for lunch, consoled him for a while, and promised him that I would go and talk his sons. On one more occasion, when I was gathering firewood on a hill, he went too - actually he had to, despite his feebleness, because he would not otherwise have had any firewood for cooking. He and I talked there for over two hours, mostly about how unhelpful the mediation by the court, the township and the village had been, and he spoke of how morally wrong his sons were, saying they had made him too disappointed and that he felt life was insufferable. It was also because of these that I decided to go and talk to their sons. That night, I went and tried to reason with Laoliu. I said, ‘You should take good care of your father and you will obtain fame (filial piety) and gain (that sum of money). If you don’t, and if your five brothers sued you, not only would it be a disgrace for you, but you would have to take that money out - that money belongs not to you, but your farther, and your brothers each should have a share of it.’ Admittedly, Hou is not faultless. Laoliu mentioned on that night, that his father had been self-absorbed as a young man, and whenever he had money, he put it all in his own pocket and never considered giving some to his sons. When his mother was alive, Laoliu added, his father had been as inconsiderate, especially toward him. And he said that when his father had bought cakes and the like, he would have them alone and not give some to him. Many such seemingly small things had driven his son to behave unkindly towards him.

There were times when things were so bad Hou didn't even have water to use in his hardest days. Because they lived far away from a well, Laoliu bought a submersible pump, used it to pump water, but not for his father. Though Hou’s water vat was placed in the same room as Laoliu’s water vat, Laoliu always pumped to fill his own water vat without taking the trouble to fill his father’s. Hou could but go and take water from the well. The father and son often quarreled over this as if they were irreconcilable enemies to one another. Hou once got ill, so seriously that he was barely able to move, nor to go and carry water with a pole. He desperately wanted to drink water, and when he was about to take water from Laoliu’s water vat, but Laoliu refused it. In a fit of rage, he smashed his son’s water vat with a stone. And his son retaliated by shattering his empty water vat. Hou could do nothing but hire a man with his own money to fetch water for him. Later on, he received a prostatitis operation, on which him spend almos all his savings. He was so frail he could hardly go to the toilet, and he had to fetch water, cook and heat his *kang* all by himself. Living under the same roof, Laoliu saw it all but looked the other way. The father and son seemed to harbored such animus toward each other.

Even though official institutional interventions by the court, the township, the village did happen, they were a mere formality and were not effective. While what Chen Qi did counted as an unofficial institutional intervention, in a society with moderate degree of kinship

bonds, the most effective unofficial institutional intervention is supposed to come from brothers and sons. Unfortunately, Hou had no brothers, and so his sons didn't have male cousins on his side. Therefore, he had none to turn to who was within a scope of relatively effective blood relationship. We could roughly speculate, from the account that Chen Qi gave of Laoliu relative to Hou's death, that Hou would likely have committed suicide sooner or later even if compensation from the expressway construction had not been an issue.

Upon Hou's death, his sons didn't seem to be remorseful, none of whom shed a tear in public during the entire funeral process. Many relatives and friends who attended his funeral felt angry but could do nothing. On the night before Hou's funeral, a ritual—in which, per local custom, paper oxen, horses and the like believed to "guide the soul" of a person who have died are burned at a proper crossroads, and the deceased person's sons and daughters in the rear of the procession are supposed to cry, even if faking it, to show mourning for the deceased—was held, but surprisingly, his six sons "didn't cry, not in the least", making the whole ritual "utterly out of tune".

Strangely enough, Hou's fifth oldest son, who had refused with all sorts of excuses to support his father, stood out and wanted to report his father's death to police. His reason was that his father was likely to have been murdered, probably by the Laoliu couple with the intention of possessing his father's money. And especially when they discovered RMB5000 in cash at the bottom of Hou's chest, this fifth oldest son "declared" very firmly that his father had been killed by Laoliu. The crowd around snatched from the fifth oldest son his mobile phone with which he was about to call police, saying, "You are blood brothers, not strangers. And since your father has been dead, and even if he had been murdered, would you really send your blood brother to prison?" Laoliu's son was kneeling before Hou's fifth oldest son, pleading with his uncle not to call police and saying that he was indeed able to confirm that his grandfather had committed suicide by drinking pesticide when he had pushed the door open and entered his grandfather's room. That the relatives and friends dissuaded the fifth oldest son was not because they really have a good opinion of Laoliu, actually they were most furious at him. They did so because they believed that the fifth oldest son didn't really grieve the death of his father, and that he actually had an ulterior motive—he still desired to get a share of the RMB70,000 in compensation that had been in Laoliu's possession.

In my later interviews, many people also talked about Hou's suicide, their accounts of the case were basically consistent. An old man surnamed He who had been on friendly terms with Hou accounted an additional episode. He said that three days before Hou's suicide, Hou had lunch at his home, during which the two old men also drank some wine. After the meal, Hou lied down on He's *kang*, talking about his sons, and saying he wanted to ask that money back from Laoliu and share it among his sons. He wanted He to help work on his son, but He declined it, saying, "If you cannot solve it yourself, it will be more useless for me to talk to him. What I can do is that when you are hungry or when you feel depressed and want some wine, come to my home." "I could see, when we were having the meal, that he was sad. On the morning of that day he committed suicide, he actually had gone and bought food himself. Upon hearing of his death, I went to his room and found on his table three fried breadsticks, two sugar-stuffed cakes, and a bottle with leftover pesticide. Obviously he had had a bite of one of the cakes but no more, he must have been so sad that he could not eat any more." He's wife seemed very angry at the Laoliu couple, and she said, "After Hou's death, his 2.4 *mu* of land was planted by his other five sons. Laoliu and his wife then demanded the land on the grounds that Hou had lived with them and so his land should belong to them. The other five brothers refused bluntly and dared him to report them to police for grabbing the land. And they also threated to use this as an opportunity get to the bottom of how their father died, whether it was suicide by drinking pesticide or foul play by Laoliu and his wife. Seeing where this was going, Laoliu and his wife droped the demand. "Hou's problem was," she added, "that he had too many sons, and each wanted to take more and contribute less. And Laoliu was particularly egregious, who wanted to taking everything and contribute nothing. Hou was just relentlessly hounded to death by them. Otherwise,

nobody would end up drinking pesticide—which is not sugar water or restorative anyway. If not in that plight, who would choose to die!"

According to my investigation, another reason Hou's death generated such a controversy was because the suicide appeared to be particularly high-profiled in the village. A dependent old man who was not poor was pressed into a hopeless situation by his sons, in which he ended up taking his own life over despair. As for many other old people who died by suicide of despair over survival problems, their stories perhaps were not as complicated as Hou's, but their suicides followed basically the same logic. Just like the problem of suicide which we will discuss in the next chapter among old people in individualistic societies, relations of incapacitated old people may actually boil down to their relations with daughters-in-law; when their daughters-in-law refuse to take care of them, they have but two options: either to die of starvation or illness, or to commit suicide decently. While this certainly is not yet prevalent in loose-knit societies, such a trend is increasingly obvious. It is just because of this that I am very worried by the occurrence in a tight-knit society of two suicide of despair over survival problems. This is because if the degree of kinship bonds and degree of regulatory control continues to weaken to the extent of that what we will see in individualistic societies to be discussed next, all kind of suicide today among old people in loose-knit societies would be very likely to be the tomorrow of tight-knit societies, and seemingly, soon.

By comparison with tight-knit societies, we would find that non-institutional intervention in loose-knit societies is apparently weak, because of which perhaps loose-knit societies have a grimmer picture of suicide among old people than tight-knit societies do. Conversely, we could tell, just because of a moderate degree of kinship bonds, few in loose-knit societies would like to come forward to intervene, and even if some do come forward, their intervention is far from effective. But in tight-knit societies, a strong degree of kinship bonds would prompt people from inside clans to demand justice, as in the case of the suicide of Ke Han's father—which we discussed in the previous chapter—upon whose death members of his clan threatened to "kill Ke Han". At the same time, a moderate degree of regulatory control in loose-knit societies dictates that public opinions and disputes, though considerable, seem to work little. In other words, "language" in loose-knit societies cannot in the least be used as "violence", but which is likely in tight-knit societies. So there is a stark contrast in terms of consequences of death by suicide among old people. While Ke Han from a tight-knit society, when faced with massive censure and condemnation, "felt himself to be in one of the Five Black Categories, unable to speak" and even had to "not appear in the day, whenever possible, and to go home at night, trying to avoid being sworn at by reducing contact with fellow villagers", Hou Qianliang's sons behaved as if nothing had happened and "didn't shed a tear when they were supposed to cry, not even feigning a cry", and more ironically, upon Hou's death, "scrambled for that remaining 2.4 *mu* field".

Admittedly, I also believe, and facts have shown, that it is much better to have such a moderate regulatory control system than to have none or a weaker regulatory control system; at least when people make discussions, they would reflect for themselves: for middle-aged people, they might think it wrong to press their parents into a desperate plight, and for old people, they would feel it miserable in old age to have many children, and contrast it with how they while young wanted to have more sons—and even with the suicide of Jing Gang who committed suicide for having no son. It is only that unfortunately, with weakening kinship bonds and regulatory control comes the weakening—and even complete disappearance—of unofficial institutional intervention like what Chen Qi did, as well as reproach and condemnation from others. More and more suicides of despair over survival problems among old people in loose-knit societies are expediting the possibility of such changes, which in return are driving more and more old people to commit suicide over despair. And the interplay of both drives the shift in suicides in loose-knit societies from relatively discrete to much more concentrated.

## 4.4 "*Bentou*" and Farmer Suicide in Loose-Knit Societies

In the previous section, we discussed the origins of and general mechanisms of change in suicide in loose-knit societies from an age group perspective. The question that we are going to address next is what common factors contribute to the characteristic distribution of suicide in the three age groups described. I will try in this section to make sense of farmer suicide starting off with a phrase which farmers in loose-knit societies often cite—"*bentou*" (hope; wish; something to look forward to).

### *4.4.1 "Bentou"*

Wu (2009: 54), based on his field research experience, boils suicide among farmers in northern China down to a culmination of "*guo rizi*" ((to pass one's days; to live one's life; to get on). He believes that the two basic states of survival for the Chinese people—getting on and conducting oneself—involves a matter of "justice", which means that in domestic life, namely in the process of getting on, none of the family members feel aggrieved and all have their own proper place, otherwise people would choose to commit suicide to resist and seek justice inside of the family—in other words, failure in *guo rizi* leads to suicide.

In fact, I don't doubt that the "*guo rizi*" analysis framework is suitable in part to interpret farmer suicides in societies such as loose-knit societies. In many cases that I have described in the previous sections, the suicide victims all quite frequently used the phrase "*guo rizi*" in such utterances as "What life I'm living! It's better for me to die", "What's the point of the life that I'm living? It's better for me to die", "Stress is so huge that I cannot continue to live my life, and I'd rather die", and "What life am I living with you? I find no reason to live it. I'd rather die and feel nothing", which show a close correlation of *guo rizi* with their suicide. On the surface, therefore, failure in *guo rizi* seemed to cause their suicide—in other words, they felt so aggrieved in the process of *guo rizi* as to take their own lives in the name of seeking domestic justice.

But things are not that simple, and actually much more complex. Failure in *guo rizi* doesn't necessarily create grievances, nor certainly causes suicide. In farmers' eyes, one who fails in *guo rizi might* as well idle the days away and spend the rest of his/her life rather than die prematurely. Take Laotong, whose story we have described in a previous section. In fact, she has too much regret in her life, especially about love of which she was almost deprived. And even now, the marriage which her father arranged for her 30 years ago still rankles her. But, that later she could get on was because her children had grown up and she finally was in a position to give orders. She has lived by the lyrics of "Ren Zi Gao", that is what she said is "idling for no purpose". Apparently, that she stressed that she didn't commit suicide no more was not that she got justice from inside of her family, though she played a "passing god of wealth" or "storekeeper" role no more and was literally in charge of her family; as a wife in charge now, she seems to have gotten justice from inside the family, but her deep-seated frustrations over "love" which caused her suicide didn't disappear accordingly but were replaced by children, household management and the like as important to a middle-aged woman as love. It was just this shift in life tasks and roles, that changed her, who had tried in vain to get out of misfortune by choosing to divorce and commit suicide, but who, on the cusp of middle-aged, felt disgraceful herself—in her own words, "Being a grandmother now, it would be disgraceful to divorce, and no good to my son if I committed suicide." This suggests also, in effect, that her suicide thinking while a young woman, has been change, and even if she wanted to commit suicide, it might be something else that caused her to do so.

Why, on the other hand, middle-aged people who while young attempted suicide due to frustrations over love might still choose to commit suicide due to pressure, for example from social comparison? It is because after entering middle-aged, though such transcending things as love go down to a minor position, people have pursuits on a different plane that occupy their mind, consciousness and meaning world like having a son to carry on their family lineage and living a more successful life than their peers. Similarly, in their old age, people have no more choice as to whether they have a son to carry on their family lineage, and think lightly of pressure from social comparison, because these things seem to them no

longer important as they are aware that they don't have much time to go; instead, they are faced with new problems like dutifulness of sons and elderly care for them, and live until the end of their life in acquirement of such.

Thus, in each important life stage or age, is a range of wishes that people want to fulfill is closely linked with suicide. These wishes are, in the words of farmers, "*bentou*". This is why we often hear they say, when describing their *guo rizi*, "Living without *bentou*, I'd rather die", "For what am I living? What's the point of my living?", Or "I have no *bentou* to be alive". Further, if we ask farmers what *guo rizi* is for, they would speak of a lot of things, which are exactly what they call "*bentou*". Conversely, when "*bentou*" couldn't be realized or fulfilled, *guo rizi* in itself loses legitimacy. It is just in this sense that I think that "*bentou*" works as a more profound cultural mechanism that correlates with farmer suicide than "*guo rizi*" does.

### *4.4.2 Meaning of "Bentou" and Its Relations to Farmer Suicide*

"*Bentou*" is "*bentouer*" without the "r" sound at the end. The character "*ben*" has four senses, according to *Dictionary of Contemporary Chinese* (Xiandai Hanyu Cidian): (a) To move directly toward a destination, as in *touben* (to go to somebody for shelter); (b) a preposition, meaning "toward" or "to", as in *ben yuchang kaiqu* (to drive towards the fish farm); (c) to approach a particular age, as in *ben liushi de ren le* (a person almost 60 years old); and (d) to engage in certain activities toward a particular end, as in *nimen shengchang shang hai que shenme cailiao, wo qu ben* (If you still need production material, I'll do what I can to get them). In this book, the meaning (a) is adopted, and of course, "*ben*" herein also suggests a direction. "*Bentou*" is defined by *A Dictionary of Contemporary Chinese* as "a future or prospect that one expects to achieve through endeavor", a meaning that is basically adopted and extended in this book to mean a hope or hopes or value that one can achieve in life through his/her endeavor.

At the same time, I'd like to note that in this book, "*bentou*" is both something static and a dynamic process. As something static it refers to what is existentially concreate, something with experiential reality and can be truly obtained. For example, "having a son" is a "*bentou*", but to have a "son" is a process by which to realize the "*bentou*" of "having a son". Therefore, I interpret farmer suicide in a loose-knit society as a product of failure that farmers experience in the process of realizing "*bentou*" of various sorts. And, when farmers say "Death is better than living without *bentou*", they don't mean that they do not have a "*bentou*" towards which they are striving. What they mean is that despite their efforts they have been unable to reach it. In other words, "living without *bentou*" actually means a state of life in which the hopes or wishes called *bentou* cannot be achieved or realized. Moreover, *bentou* is periodic. Generally speaking, each individual conditioned by local culture has, within a particular life stage, a *bentou* that is more important or dominant; upon the conclusion of this particular stage, the individual would feel his/her life consummated if he/she realized this *bentou*, otherwise he/she would feel his/her life a failure and might thus commit suicide. So we may also take a look at the matter of "*yi*" inside of family, which is "meaning" here, not "justice". Obviously, meaning encompasses justice. Justice is in a sense a form of meaning; suicides as a result of frustration in connection with justice can only be small in number, and justice cannot be used to explain how the majority of suicides happen.

Of course, in a loose-knit society, there is a close correlation between *bentou* and *guo rizi*. While *guo rizi* is a process of an individual living until death, *bentou* is what drives the individual to complete this process, because unlike animals, most people don't actually idle their days away but have all kinds of pursuits. In other words, *guo rizi* is actually a status of being alive, but *bentou* answers more abstract questions about motive mechanisms like causes of being alive and purpose of being alive. By extension, I think that the main meaning of *bentou* is to address the problems of legality and rationality of being alive.

Both the legality and the rationality of being alive are a spiritual ground for being alive. We thus will find that frustrations that arise in the process of *guo rizi* may cause a few suicides, but that when their legality or rationality of being alive is discontinued or taken

away by some things, events or persons, people would be more likely at a deeper level to choose suicide. Let's now take a look at how Wu Fei describes the relationship between grievances and suicide. In his eyes, those farmers in northern China committed suicide in a show of resistance because they had suffered from an unjust state inside of family—grievances (Wu 2009: 54). But an empirical fact is that though farmers, when speaking of their suicide, also would mention grievances like "I felt aggrieved, I thought to myself, and I found it no better for me to live than to die by drinking pesticide"—it seems there is a close relationship between grievances and suicide, many of them would also find reasons for them to not commit suicide, such as "I could not die, I thought to myself, what would my son rely on if I died? I felt aggrieved, and wanted to die, but when I thought of my son, I put up with the suffering, and just tried to get on with it." Such reasons are actually what farmers mean by *bentou*. When the desire to live for the sake of their sons still existed in the speakers (i.e. Interviewees), and when it became what their *bentou* consisted of, grievances were then dismissed as unimportant; in other words, injustice inside of family was dismissed as unimportant. A good example is Laotong whose suicide we have discussed previously. Didn't she have grievances? She certainly had grievances, and her grievances resulted in her attempted suicide (which was in essence not caused by her grievances because her *bentou* in that particular stage of her life was something different). But, after entering her middle-aged, she chose a different status of being alive; she didn't seek suicide anymore because she thought she must consider her son, and so too she didn't want a divorce—her son was her most important *bentou* in this stage of her life. Thus, Laotong turned to the song "Ren Zi Gao", and that she listened to it once or twice a day indicates that she was enduring her grievances to fulfill her *bentou*. And the injustice that she suffered from inside of her family as a result of her marriage her father had arranged for her 30 years before, once she lived through it, was no longer able to drive her to commit suicide, though it never disappeared. Therefore, we say that grievances do not have nothing to do with suicide, but that they are not a key factor that leads to suicide. And similarly, the failure of *guo rizi* is not a driver of suicide. More fundamentally, suicide is, in effect, is an ultimate status of being alive when farmers are unable to fulfill their *bentou*.

We have said that *bentou* deals mainly with the problems of legality and rationality of being alive. But exactly what, in a loose-knit society, are dominant things[7] of *bentou* at these two levels? We still need to look at this question from two respects, that is the loose-knit society on the whole, and the age groups that comprises it—the periodicity of *bentou*.

Let's start off with the first respect, in analysis of which the second respect will be touched on.

From the angle of legality, the dominant *bentou* for people in a loose-knit society is to have a son or carry on their family lineages. Or in other words, the legality of an individual living in a loose-knit society comes not from anything else, but having at least one son. Therefore, if a man has no son, his wealth or power—however big it is—is at best an embroidered pillow before the most important *bentou* of a "son". The establishment of this legality remained quite rigid in the 1980s and 1990s, even under the tremendous impact of the family planning policy. Since 2000, birth notions have somewhat changed as young people born in the 1980s and after get married—the desire to have a son has slightly weakened. On the whole, nevertheless, to have at least one son remains the dominant *bentou*, and even those young people born in the 1980s and after who are getting married insisted on this point when they were interviewed. Obviously, the established culture concerning the legality of being alive is equally influential on the young for the present.

To understand the dominant *bentou* of "having a son", we have to fathom the state of people "having no son". It is just this group of people's state of survival and living that can reflect more accurately how the dominant *bentou* of "having a son" underpins the legality of being alive in a loose-knit society.

"Having no son" is, above all, about two "fears"—a fear of having no offspring, and a fear of being uncared for in old age for having no son. The former is more about value, and the

latter is more about function. When it comes to the fear of having no offspring, having no son to continue his line of blood, a farmer sees himself as no different than a walking corpse alive, unable to see continuity of his life, and living so is nothing short of death. So far as the second fear is concerned, having no son means a miserable life in old age, the fear of which would linger through the rest of one's life after having tried in vain to have a son. The problem is that once the fear of having no offspring is constructed firmly as part of a culture, it would be hard to something to substitute this fear before this culture is deconstructed by some force. As to the fear of being uncared for in old age for having no son, the persistent official institutional support not only in loose-knit societies but in much of rural China forces farmers to consider the necessity of a son lest they be uncared for in old age.

In both Ji and Yu Villages, one cannot overcome the first fear except that he has a son or an adopted son, otherwise he for certain is ridiculed as a "*juehuqi*" or "*juehutou*". The second fear, when there is no intervention in the form of official institutional support, can only be solved by taking in a son-in-law. Certainly, villagers enjoying the Five Guarantees (food, clothing, medical care, housing and funeral) don't have the second fear because they have access to official institutional support, and since they have no spouse, they are not as much subject to the influence of culture the first fear builds as married villagers. Whether in Ji or Yu Village, however, a son-in-law taken in plays only a functional, not a value, role, that is he could solve the problem of providing for his wife's parents in old age but could not solve the problem of carrying on their family lineage. And even if he is seen as a tool by which to add to the family a male member, this male member would, in patrilineal terms, still be not pure in blood. Thus, a villager, even if he adopted a son, is nearly in a state of having no offspring, the fear of which he could not truly remove.

Even worse, leaving aside for now the second fear that cannot be overcome, even if the second fear is solved by taking in a son-in-law, there has not been established in Ji and Yu Villages a proper cultural system concerning *zhaofu yanglao*—conversely, the established cultural system around which the son is centered, ostracizes the son-in-law taken in. Apart from a marginalized role that those taken in as a son-in-law have in everyday life, the worst is that in local cultural systems, there is no place where this group of persons could rest their soul. This is most notably manifested in the funeral and burial culture. Whether in Ji Village or in Yu Village, there is the notion of *zufen shan* (literally, "ancestral grave mound"), though it has different names—called *zufen shan* in Yu Village, and *Fenquanzi* (burial ground) in Ji Village. A *zufen shan* is a plot of land where the dead are buried on a patrilineal basis, with graves laid out in a pyramid according to seniority. Take Ji Village where the pyramid layout of a burial ground is described as "*dingjiao*" (bearing the feet) by villagers. Only male childres can play the role of *dingjiao*, and the *dingjiao* serves can only serve their birth parents. The phrase *dingjiao* is twofold: on the one hand, it duplicates and transfers to the underworld the patriarchal authority that the parents have over their children—namely, as a son, one is trampled under the feet of his parents, whether he is alive or dead; on the other hand, it is a visual reflection of a family's continuation of life, thus putting an end to the fear of having no offspring, for, when viewed from the top of the pyramid, it gives a feeling of continuous posterity. Therefore, when we asked the farmers why they must have a son, they said that it was just for them to have someone as a *dingjiao* upon their death. They actually meant that they need someone to continue their family lineage. Both are, in fact, completely the same, and it is only that the pyramid-shaped burial ground represents this cultural system vividly in a specific physical form.

But a man in a matrilocal marriage is not eligible to be a *dingjiao* under the graves of his parents-in-law who don't want to trample or dominate one rather than their real son; nor is this son-in-law willing to be trampled underfoot by ones with whom he has no blood relationship. The established culture offers to this group of people a way out: either to have their coffins sent to where they were born to be buried under the feet of their birth parents, or to have a grave built separately in a new spot of the place where they live with their wives. Either way, it suggests ostracism against them. Therefore, not only is it hard for them while alive to have a sense of identification in everyday life, they still would be lonely after

death. It is just on the basis of these established cultural system that these men who marry into their wives' families are marginalized in the latter's villages, in normal cultures built on patriarchal blood relationship, the moment they break with their patriarchal circles, they would become ones of no position. Every individual thus conditioned, if not out of absolute necessity, is unwilling to marry into his wife's family. That they are willing to marry into their wives' families is largely because they probably also have the fear of having no offspring for being unable to marrying a woman—when the first layer of what we call the legality of being alive—having a son—would outweigh all other possible difficulties in their lives. When they marry into their wives' families and have sons, they would feel somewhat relieved that their sons, when dead, would be buried as their *dingjiao* under their own graves.

Conversely, we would find that those who don't have their own sons all have the fear of having no offspring (except that they have adopted sons whom could be barely be seen as real ones). It is because even if they eventually have grandsons (more accurately, their daughters' sons), the latter bear little relation to them and would only be *dingjiao* for their sons-in-law so that there would be nothing under their own graves. Therefore, the design of *dingjiao* is also an exact embodiment on a different layer of the state of having no offspring. By closer inspection, we will find that both the state of people without offspring and those sons-in-laws taken in intensifies justification for "having a son" as the legality of being alive, that is the dominant *bentou* for the living of people. And this state also increases the rigidity of cultural systems built around the son and strengthens the importance of the son. But it is also implied that women are culturally nonessential. Even if they are buried at a *zufen shan* or *fenquanzi*, women only have their place as an appendage to men; they don't have a position culturally assigned which is specific to them. The same is true for Yu Village, where the cultural kernel has the same implication as that in Ji Village, though in a different form; it is manifested in "lanterns" that the villagers use as sacrifice to the deceased buried in their *zufen shan* during the Spring and Qingming Festivals, one lantern for a male member, so that the graves whose occupiers had numerous male descendants are ablaze with lanterns, contrasting starkly with those without male offspring—their graves are completely in the dark.

So far as human life cycle is concerned, middle-aged people, especially those aged 30–40, in a loose-knit society, have the strongest desire to have at least one son, because physically speaking, for people older than 40 to have a son, there is no certainty that they are still fertile, let along producing a son, and even if there is some certainty, they would face high risk due to their age. For people in the middle-aged who have no son, to have a son is their biggest *bentou* and simultaneously is what gives them biggest pressure. Young people and old people are quite different from middle-aged people. Young people, though also with strong expectations in this respect, could put off the matter since they are still young; old people are already quite resigned to their reality, and were they not able to accept it, they must have struggled desperately through their middle-aged.

Therefore, it is not hard for us to understand why Jing Gang, whose case we have discussed in a previous section, chose to commit suicide. To him, the fact that he had no son deprived him of his legality of being alive, making it possible for him to commit suicide at any time. All other direct specific reasons for his suicide were simply temporarily triggers for it. To him, to "have a son" had been his most important *bentou* since the beginning of his marriage. It could well be imagined that such a *bentou*, if without excessive institutional (e.g. family planning policy) or physiological (e.g. infertility) intervention, is achievable with the passage of time. But Jing failed to fulfill this biggest *bentou* of his, though a dozen years had passed. Then what was he living for? And in the cultural system where he lived, what could justify his living? Certainly, I cannot say that all individuals without a son might choose to commit suicide. I simply mean that that cultural system imperceptibly led people to have the thought of suicide, and as to which particular individual choose so, it is a matter of much contingency.

But, in looking into social factors of suicide, we focus more attention on some relatively stable factors of necessity as a whole. Put extremely, when to "have a son" is regarded as

the biggest *bentou*, that is the justification for the legality of being alive, having no son constitutes a sufficient condition for suicide, but not a necessary condition. So we could understand why Chen Ying's suicide became a possibility. She actually killed herself after having struggle for long as an individual without a place in that cultural system, or put extremely, she died in place of his father, Chen Zhong. Imagine this: had Chen Zhong had a son, would Chen Ying still have chosen to kill herself? And if she chose to kill herself, there would have been different manifestations. Moreover, even if a woman was satisfied with matrilocal residence, she could hardly escape such a fate likewise. In speaking of her attempted suicide while young, an old woman who was in a similar situation (except that she was satisfied with her husband) said, "Every [woman] in a matrilocal marriage would be wronged. Who doesn't want to have a son anyway? So you desperately want a son, and you would still be bullied so long as you have such a husband." It is also because of this that both my interviewees—Teacher Fang and Chen Ying's uncle Chen Qi—stressed repeatedly that Chen Zhong having no son foreshadowed the suicide of Chen Ying. Further, we would find that the suicide of many young men and women was actually associated, directly or indirectly, with the dominant *bentou* of having a son—namely the legality of being alive. We can get some insights from the design of *dingjiao* on a burial ground alone. Some young people, male and female, such as Fengzi in Case 3–2 and the interviewee's niece in Case 3–3, would choose to commit suicide in response to their parents' interference in their marriage. This is because as individuals they actually have no place in this cultural structure.

From the dimension of rationality, the dominant *bentou* for farmers in a loose-knit society is to live a good life, which, though a form of *guo rizi*, refers not to what Wu Fei believes is the entire process from birth to death, but to the quality of life, both emotional or mental and material, and put extremely, mainly the quality of material life—more specifically, the amount of wealth, embodied in clothing, food, means of travel, and especially shelter, most notably a decent house. That the rationality of being alive cannot be satisfied means that farmers have failed to fulfill their *bentou*, causing their suicide likewise. But, as with the legality of being alive described above, that farmers suffer setbacks or failures in fulfilling their dominant *bentou* at the level of rationality is simply a sufficient condition for their suicide, not a necessary condition. Similarly, not all farmers in such difficulties are certain to choose to commit suicide, but, objectively, the loss of the rationality of being alive underlies their thought of suicide. And which particular individuals would choose to commit suicide is associated with events in the run-up to suicide and the suddenness of suicide action.

Let's first look at mental dimensions, which are mainly about mental pleasure and satisfaction pursued based on emotions, most notably emotions that the husband and wife (and also lovers) have towards each other, as well as those that parents have towards their children and vice versa. There are roughly three types of individuals with emotional needs, namely the children, the wife and husband, and the parents. What children expect of their parents is care, and it is love and concord that the wife and husband expect of each other, and mainly dutifulness that parents expect of their children. In reality, however, these seemingly common emotional expectations are not very easy to satisfy. It is not rare that suicide occurs because emotional expectations are not fulfilled. As for sons and daughters, especially in their marital affairs, when they expect their parents to consider their happiness as individuals but suffer their parents' arbitrary interference in their marriage, their emotional pain is very likely to cause them to commit suicide. For a couple who expect love of each other as well as family happiness, when domestic violence, an extramarital affair, quarrels and other trivialities occur, their expectations of love would likewise be shattered, often resulting in a tragedy of suicide. Certainly, the above two dimensions might be intertwined. In one of my interviews, for example, I learned about the suicide of a middle-aged woman, whose story was quite similar to those of Laotong and Laodu that we have previously described. She attempted a suicide, but failed, in opposition to a marriage that her parents arranged for her. Later on, after having her own children, she once thought of idling the rest of her life away as Laotong did. While she never could give up her quest and

longing for real love, there were in reality many cultural shackles—for example, a divorce is something indecent and even shameful. At last, after seeing, as a bridesmaid for her younger brother's bride, the happiness of the bride and bridegroom, she was so depressed that on the very night of their wedding, she drank pesticide and died. As for parents, what they expect of their children is filial dutifulness, and so they would often feel depressed when their children are unfilial. Apart from some suicides of despair over survival problems as a result of predicaments that are were by unfilial children, as in the suicide of Hou Qianliang (Case 3.9), there are also affective suicides of despair where the victims could support their own lives but were unable to tolerate such unfilial acts of their children as verbal abuse. Generally speaking, when *bentou* at mental level comes to nothing, it is very likely to cause affective suicide of despair, a type of suicide that is prevalent to varying degrees among the young, middle-aged, and old groups of people.

On the level of rationality, however, dominant *bentou* actually unfolds around good material conditions needed in *guo rizi*. Therefore, of suicides resulting from unfulfilled *bentou* at mental level, many were connected with material conditions more or less, directly or indirectly. For example, if an individual is dissatisfied at material level, he/she might feel unfulfilled in terms of his/her *bentou* at mental level. Take what parents expect of their children. When parents expect their children to be filial, they begin by thinking about their children's "ability to provide for" them, and then proceed level by level up to "non-humiliating" and "respecting the parents". When their children cannot uphold "non-humiliating" and "respecting the parents" but still can provide for them, they still have conditions for survival, so to speak, but when there is no guarantee that they would be provided for, their emotional expectations in terms of filial piety would thoroughly be shattered (there are objective exceptions; here I mean situations where children are able but choose not to provide for their parents). Fundamentally, a suicide thus caused is one of despair over survival, but we could not say for certain that there is no reason of despair over shattered emotional expectations.

Certainly, main pressure at material level actually concerns largely the older age group in young and middle-aged people, generally those aged between 30 and 59, most notably those in the 35–59 age group. They have parents to support and children to raise, and more importantly, they have to build houses and find wives for their sons reaching adulthood so as to complete their missions in life. This dominant *bentou* of theirs is often made much more important by intensely comparing with their peers. Speaking of his attempted suicide, a middle-aged man remarked that "Man moves up while water runs down. All people want to have a better life. Between several sons-in-law of the same family, there for certain is comparison. Seeing that your sisters-in-law live a better life than your wife, I don't think you feel good, let alone your wife. All except those mentally impaired are capable of keeping up with the Joneses. The same is true even for brothers. All being sons-in-laws, others drive their cars to your wife's family but you ride a shabby bike, I don't think you would be smug about it, right? And you are sure to feel bad." But people are different in various respects like personal ability and even opportunity. It is thus inevitable that people stratify in terms of material, even among peers, and it is inevitable also that some become frustrated. In other words, some are unavoidably unable to fulfill their *bentou*, and some would unavoidably be stuck so deep in a plight that there is no way out for them. But people could not have no *bentou* to be alive, and their *bentou* at material level is equally important. "One must have *bentou* to be alive, and if he (or she) doesn't strive, how could his (or her) family keep up with others'? The people strive for a better live and the country strives for higher GDP. Only in this way is it meaningful to be alive." This is what Teacher Fang, a middle school teacher that I interviewed, said in recapping why his fellow villagers strove. These material *bentou* is embodied in various respects, most notably when, generally speaking, one compares with others, especially his/her peers.

"Comparison can be uplifting." So said a middle-aged woman. But what she said just reflects in a different respect that comparison, as described previously, is a process of working inward. Only when we find, in our comparison with others, that we are better than

others, is it possible that comparison can be uplifting. But when we find ourselves no better than others, we would have two options: first, when we think, through a careful self-evaluation, that we could catch up with and even live a better life than others if we redouble our efforts, we would live working hard, and as individuals we have the rationality of being alive in this social and cultural structure—that is we have *bentou* that could be fulfilled; second, when, after a careful self-evaluation, we feel it impossible for us to surpass others however hard we work, we generally would lose the force that drives us to fulfill our *bentou*, and even the force that keeps us alive, and in consequence, we would either live passively and in a way that is akin to death from the angle of the rationality of being alive, or go to extremes and choose to commit suicide.

Having a better life, namely having better material conditions, would often become an extremely important *bentou* for farmers when they deal with what we have described as the legality of being alive. Comparison resulting from pursuing good material conditions is sometimes quite narrow, whether in time or space. When both neither time nor space could make it possible to satisfy or fulfill material *bentou*, suicide would follow like a shadow, as in the case of Li's wife (Case 3.7). Of course, if an individual's own problem made his/her whole family unable to fulfill those specific *bentou* described above, he/she might commit altruistic suicide, as in the case of Yu Sheng's wife.

All in all, the legality and the rationality of *bentou* are interconnected, the former being the foundation and the latter being the extension. While both are drivers of being alive, legality is more important than rationality. In a loose-knit society, therefore, when an individual has not a son—that is he/she has not yet realized the legality of being alive, frustration over his/her unfulfilled *bentou* is enough to turn his/her concrete contents at rationality level into something insignificant. When it is possible in reality to fulfill *bentou* at legality level, all sorts of concrete contents at rationality level and intense comparisons thus caused are, in essence, still subordinate to contents at rationality level, which play an important role in supporting the former.

*Bentou* in a loose-knit society is, nevertheless, not in an absolutely static state. In fact, concrete contents of dominant *bentou* and even dominant status thereof change gradually, and those very changes in return influence the change in the distribution of suicide types among farmers in a loose-knit society.

Overall, in loose-knit societies, dominant *bentou* at legality level has already tended to be superseded by contents at rationality level; that is, the desire for a son so as to carry on the family lineage, though still quite deep-rooted, is becoming more and more secular, and material contents originally at the level of rationality of being alive are becoming more and more important. At the same time, considerable changes have taken place at rationality level, most notably secularization at spiritual level. This is consistent with subtle changes at legality level.

Specifically, conjugal love, and love between lovers, is becoming not as sacred as before, and the notions of marriage, especially those of divorce, are not as rigid as before. Therefore, conflicts between young couples, and even between some in the middle-aged, if associated with love, are more and more solved through divorce, rather than through one party's suicide as was often the case in the past. The mother of suicide victim Fengzi in Case 3.2 remarked that her daughter, if living now, would not have committed suicide, no matter what happened to her, which is quite revealing.

As a matter of fact, divorces among young people have gradually outnumbered suicides among them. Take the village group with whom I stayed during my survey in Ji Village, which in the past five years saw 6 young couples divorced but no suicide among the young villagers. Similarly, in the village group where suicide victim Chen Ying in Case 3.1 had lived, 3 young couples divorced and only one person—namely Chen Ying—committed suicide. My survey in Yu Village found a similar change; a young man killed himself just because his wife wanted a divorce. Therefore, the trend in these changes closely correlates with a significant decrease in the rate of suicide among young people, especially young women. At the same

time, such a general trend largely coincides with a significantly declining rate of suicide among young women in tight-knit societies.

Filial piety towards parents are collapsing drastically, more on in loose-knit societies than in tight-knit societies, and as a result, there are more and more suicides of despair over emotions and survival among old people in loose-knit societies, with a much faster increasing rate of suicide than in tight-knit societies. Correspondingly, parents' affection and care for their children increasingly goes beyond original cultural constraints so that the latter has growing autonomy. And parents' interference in their children's marriage, which was widely the main cause of suicide among young men and women in the 1980s and the 1990s, now rarely leads to suicide. Therefore, though it is mainly birth parents that are to blame for inter-generational conflict in loose-knit societies which leads to suicide among young men and women, and in tight-knit societies, conflict resulting in suicide occurs mainly between husbands and wives and between wives and their mothers-in-law or fathers-in-law, what underlies in this change basically remains the same. Certainly, when the desire at rationality level to have a better life, that is to have good material conditions, is more and more to the fore, this means that the tremendous pressure on people in the middle-aged—the most prominent age in their life cycles, has not yet been substantively relieved. It is just because of this that we discover that suicide rates among middle-aged people in loose-knit societies have not fallen significantly.

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# Footnotes

1 Therefore, in the field investigation in Yu Village, I mostly made use of information and data collected by myself and also some collected by Tian Meng. I hereby express my sincere appreciation. Of course, I take responsibility for my own remarks.

2 "*juehu qi'er*" is a very rude phrase in Ji Village meaning "May you die without sons".

3 *Luohannüs* (literally "an arhat woman") is a local phrase describing a woman with good endowments, and *dianjiaoer* (literally "being on tiptoe") describing a handicapped son. Both are used as a hyperbole to say that a daughter is inferior to a son.

4 Local colloquial phrase to mean a place where the dead, generally from one clan, are buried, with graves laid out in a pyramid based on seniority to form quite a big burial ground or hill.

5 Actually, all my "sudden" was "intentional", that is "faked". Sometimes I thought whether this is proper in the sense of "fieldwork ethics", but because of the difficulty of research on that sensitive subject of suicide that I had chosen to investigate, I often had to "play the fool" in the process of investigation, and even to steer my interviewees towards such topics intentionally or unintentionally.

6 Laotong said that her second oldest daughter was born in the same year as I was, so her suicide must have taken place in about 1987.

7 The word "dominant" is used here because in every type of society, there are numerous *bentou*, and so too in single individuals - it could be a house, a car, a person, an official position and so on and so forth. But, generally speaking, whether it be a society or a single individual, within a particular period, there is one most important *bentou* around which all other *bentou* unfolds. This most important *bentou*, we call it the "dominant *bentou*".

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# 4. Farmer Suicide in an Individualistic Society

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An individualistic society is one that features weak kinship bonds, and weak regulatory control as we have discussed in the theoretical framework section, an ideal type of society opposite to a tight-knit society. From the perspective of academic tradition, it is similar to the society with a low degree of integration and regulation depicted by Durkheim (1996).

## 1 Overview

In order to study characteristics, distributions and mechanisms of suicides by farmers in an individualistic society, I did field researches on villages with a silimar social pattern. These villages are administratively subordinate to a town in Yingcheng city, Hubei province.

I conducted the survey together with Doctor Chen Xun from the Center for China Rural Governance, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, from September 2010 to January 2011. Thanks to the help of local government departments, we collected data from 15 villages. Apart from two villages whose data was incomplete, this chapter used data from the other 13, including 5 administrative villages and 8 natural villages.

These villages had a combined population of 7159, very close to the size of the sample for the tight-knit society (6613) and that for the loose-knit society (7636) in the previous two chapters.

Like the previous two chapters, this chapter used suicide statistics from 1980 to 2009. After a house-to-house survey that included semi-structured interviews, I tabulated 143 cases of suicide that had occurred during these three decades, see Table 1.

***Table 1*** Suicide deaths among farmers in an individualistic society (persons, %)

| Gender | Age group | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Young (15–34)** | **Middle-aged (35–39)** | **Old (60 and above)** | **Total** |
| Male | 5 (3.50) | 7 (4.90) | 58 (40.56) | 70 (48.95) |
| Female | 19 (13.29) | 10 (6.99) | 44 (30.77) | 73 (51.05) |
| Total | 24 (16.78) | 17 (11.89) | 102 (71.33) | 143 (100.00) |

Table 1 shows the absolute numbers and proportions of suicide deaths by age group and gender in an individualistic society. The most striking finding about age distribution is that suicides among older adults far exceeded those among the young and the middle-aged. Unlike in a tight-knit society and the loose-knit society, the elderly in an individualistic society were more likely to kill themselves than the other two age groups while the young adults were the least prone to do so. And the proportion of suicides by the middle-aged in a loose-knit society was larger than that in the two other societies where the proportions were similarly small. By gender, suicide had an even distribution in an individualistic society.

In sharp contrast, female suicides were more common than male suicides in a loose-knit society and took an overwhelming share in a tight-knit society.

Overall, according to Tables 1 and 2, the key to understanding suicide in an individualistic society is to understand suicide among the elderly.

***Table 2*** Population composition by gender and age in an individualistic society

| Gender | Age group | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Young | Middle-aged | Old |
| Male | 1299 | 1180 | 295 |
| Female | 1218 | 1083 | 316 |
| Total | 2517 | 2263 | 611 |

The number of suicide deaths alone may not suffice, and different proportions will tell more about the whole story. We may look at the composition of our sample in an individualistic society (see Table 2) before we go into an analysis of the distribution of suicide by gender and age.

According to the widely agreed classification, our research here focuses on the three age groups of the young, the middle-aged, and the old, the same as in the previous two chapters. All of them were rural citizens aged above 15 years old. For the sake of comparison, the study was also based on 2009 data; out of a population of 7159, 3753 were males and 3407 females. Table 2 shows the population disaggregated by gender and age group.

According to these demographic data, the annual suicide rates by gender and age group are calculated (unless otherwise stated, suicide rates in this book refer to crude suicide rates), as shown in Table 3.

***Table 3*** Suicide rate by gender and age in an individualistic society, 1980–2009 (1/100,000)

| Gender | Age group | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Young | Middle-aged | Old | Total |
| Male | 12.83 | 19.77 | 655.37 | 62.19 |
| Female | 52.00 | 30.78 | 464.14 | 71.42 |
| Total | 31.78 | 25.04 | 556.46 | 66.58 |

Compared with the other two societies, an individualistic society had the highest overall annual suicide rate (66.58 per 100,000), but the lowest suicide rate among young people. Suicide rates for the middle-aged were similar in an individualistic society and the tight-knit society, lower than that in a loose-knit society. But the elderly's suicide rate in an individualistic society was 3.7 times that in a tight-knit society and 5.9 times the loose-knit society, regardless of gender. Therefore, a high suicide rate among the elderly is one of the most prominent features of suicide in an individualistic society.

# 2 Types of Farmer Suicide in an Individualistic Society

## 2.1 Distribution of Basic Types of Farmer Suicide in an Individualistic Society

Table 4 shows that egoistic suicide and suicide of despair were two major types of suicide in an individualistic society, making up similar sizable proportions. And altruistic suicide and vengeful suicide took smaller shares.

***Table 4*** Distribution of basic types of farmer suicide in an individualistic society

| Ideal type | Egoistic suicide | Altruistic suicide | Vengeful suicide | Suicide of despair | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of persons | 75 | 1 | 1 | 66 | 143 |
| Percent | 52.45 | 0.70 | 0.70 | 46.15 | 100.00 |

By contrast, distribution of four types of suicide were significantly divergent in three societies. In the tight-knit society, vengeful suicides accounted for more than half of the total, and suicides of despair and altruistic suicide made up 20% respectively while they accounted for almost a half in an individualistic society. And the percentage of altruistic suicide was higher than that in the dispersed one. In the loose-knit society, the overall distribution was similar to that in an individualistic society while the proportions of egoistic suicide and suicide of despair were lower, and the proportion of altruistic suicide and vengeful suicide higher. More differences are revealed based on gender and age, see Table 5.

***Table 5*** Distribution of basic suicide types by gender and age in an individualistic society (%)

| Type of suicide | Egoistic suicide | | Altruistic suicide | | Vengeful suicide | | Suicide of despair | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| Young | 2.80 | 9.09 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.70 | 4.20 |
| Middle-aged | 4.90 | 6.29 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.70 |
| Old | 14.69 | 14.69 | 0.00 | 0.70 | 0.00 | 0.70 | 25.87 | 14.69 |

Table 5 shows that the elderly were the age group that were most likely to commit both egoistic suicide and suicide of despair. Specifically, egoistic suicide occurred among older men and women in roughly equal proportions. Compared with two other age groups, the elderly had a higher proportion of suicide of despair. And the middle-aged may more easily fall victim to egoistic suicide among four types of suicide. The young adults mainly committed egoistic suicide. In general, based on gender and age, discrete distribution of suicides in an individualistic society was in marked contrast to the concentrated distribution in the other two societies. Next, we will take a closer look at the different types of suicide expressed as a proportion of the total suicide deaths among each age group in an individualistic society, see Table 6.

***Table 6*** Distribution of basic suicide types by gender and age in an individualistic society

| Type of suicide | Egoistic suicide | | Altruistic suicide | | Vengeful suicide | | Suicide of despair | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| Youth | 16.67 | 54.17 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 4.17 | 25.00 |
| Middle-aged | 41.18 | 52.94 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 5.88 |
| Old | 20.59 | 20.59 | 0.00 | 0.98 | 0.00 | 0.98 | 36.27 | 20.59 |

As a proportion of the total suicide deaths among each age group, **%**

Table 6 shows that for the middle-aged people, regardless of gender, egoistic suicide was the most common type of suicide. Young adults, especially young women, were more likely to fall victim to suicide of despair. And senior citizens were more likely to commit either egoistic suicide or suicide of despair.

To sum up, the overwhelming majority of suicides in the elderly were egoistic suicides and suicides of despair in an individualistic society.

## 2.2 Distribution of Farmer Suicide by Empirical Type in an Individualistic Society

The previous two chapters show that the proportion of suicide by empirical type may vary in different societies. For example, egoistic suicide to evade was more prominent in a loose-knit society than in a tight-knit society. In the same vein, suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems stood out in a tight-knit society while suicide of despair over survival problems was outstanding in a loose-knit society. For the distribution of these empirical types in an individualistic society, see Table 7.

***Table 7*** Distribution of suicide by empirical type in the individualistic society

| **Ideal type** | **Egoistic suicide** | | | **Altruistic suicide** | | | **Suicide of despair** | | | **Vengeful suicide** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Empirical type** | **Evade** | **End suffering** | **Vent anger** | **Honor** | **Relief of burden** | **Responsibility** | **Value** | **Marriage and relationship problems** | **Survival problem** | **Defense against slander** | **Threat** | **P** |
| Number of people | 14 | 35 | 26 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 11 | 54 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| % | 9.79 | 24.48 | 18.18 | 0.70 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.70 | 7.69 | 37.76 | 0.00 | 0.70 | 0 |

Table 7 shows that suicide of despair over survival problems occurred most frequently among all empirical types, followed by egoistic suicide to end suffering, egoistic suicide to vent anger, egoistic suicide to evade and suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems. Altruistic suicide and vengeful suicide were negligible. Both an individualistic society and the tight-knit society witnessed concentrated distribution of twelve empirical types as the former was more concentrated. Therefore, the proportion of suicide of despair over survival problems in an individualistic society was even higher than that of vengeful suicide as a punishment in a tight-knit society.

Among the three types of society, the loose-knit society saw the most discrete distribution, as all empirical types accounted for less than 20% but more than 1%. Egoistic suicide to end suffering and suicide of despair over survival problems, the two most frequent empirical types in an individualistic society, occurred less often than three other empirical types–egoistic suicide to vent anger, egoistic suicide to evade, and suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems–in both the tight-knit society and the loose-knit society.

However, among the three empirical types of egotistic suicide, the suicides committed to vent anger were found in all three societies. In other words, this empirical type, as a common social phenomenon, requires more psychological and psychiatric researches.

In a nutshell, as we focused our research efforts on vengeful suicide as a punishment and a threat in a tight-knit society, and looked at all types of suicide for all age groups in a loose-knit society because of their discrete distribution, we will focus on suicide of despair over survival problems and egoistic suicide to end suffering in an individualistic society. In other words, we need to analyze how survival problems drove people to desperation, what inflicted physical and mental pain on them, and how desperation and pain caused them to abandon their life in an individualistic society.

# 3 Changes in Farmer Suicide in an Individualistic Society

## 3.1 Suicide Rates by Time Period in an Individualistic Society

First, we will look at how the overall suicide rate (or average annual suicide rate) in an individualistic society changed over time. See Table 8.

***Table 8*** Suicide rates by decade in an individualistic society (1/100,000)

| **Decade** | **1980–1989** | **1990–1999** | **2000–2009** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number of people | 24 | 44 | 75 |
| Suicide rate | 33.52 | 61.46 | 104.76 |

Table 8 shows dramatic increases in the average annual suicide rate from 1980 to 2009. From a relatively low level in the 1980s, it nearly doubled in the 1990s and rose to nearly twice the level of the 1990s or three times the level of the 1980s in the 2000s. In the 1980s, the suicide rate in an individualistic society was roughly equal to that of loose-knit society and lower than that in a tight-knit society. In the following decade, the suicide rate decreased in a loose-knit society, but rose in a tight-knit society and even more sharply in an individualistic society. In the 2000s, the suicide rate declined remarkably in a tight-knit

society while it increased in the other two societies, the loose-knit society in particular. In addition, no marked differences in the suicide rate were found between the three societies in the 1980s; yet significant differences were found in the 2000s when the suicide rate was nearly five times higher in an individualistic society than in a tight-knit society and about twice the level in a loose-knit society.

Psychological, psychiatric and suicidological researches can hardly explain the changes over time and the gaps between different types. That is also why a large number of medical researches in suicide used averaged numbers to ignore differences over time and from place to place. Next, we continue to track changes in farmer suicides by a different time interval, as shown in Table 9.

***Table 9*** Suicide rates by five-year period in an individualistic society (1/100,000)

| Five-year period | 1980– | 1985– | 1990– | 1995– | 2000– | 2005– |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of people | 12 | 12 | 14 | 30 | 34 | 41 |
| Suicide rate | 33.52 | 33.52 | 39.11 | 83.81 | 94.99 | 114.54 |

A time interval of five years may better reflect changes in the suicide rates than a one-year interval as suicide rates may fluctuate sharply due to contingencies. For example, annual suicide rates may rise greatly due to a sudden surge in suicide deaths at a certain time, even though the rate remained steady in other times of the years. While the annual rate cannot fully capture such a change, the five-year suicide rate can. This is particularly important for a qualitative survey that involves a small sample.

Table 9 shows that the suicide rate remained the same in the two intervals of 1980–1984 and 1985–1989, and no significant difference was found in the 1990–1994 period. However, the suicide rate rose abruptly from 1995 to 1999, more than twice the level of 1990–1994. It registered obvious growth from 2000 to 2004 and continued to increase from 2005 to 2009.

In order to explore what caused these differences, we need to further analyze changes in suicide rates from the perspective of age and gender. See Table 10.

***Table 10*** Suicide rates by decade, gender and age in an individualistic society (1/100,000)

| Age group | Gender/decade | 1980–1989 | 1990–1999 | 2000–2009 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Young | Male | 23.09 | 15.40 | 0.00 |
| | Female | 90.31 | 49.26 | 16.42 |
| Middle-aged | Male | 25.42 | 8.47 | 25.42 |
| | Female | 27.70 | 64.64 | 0.00 |
| Old | Male | 101.69 | 440.68 | 1423.73 |
| | Female | 31.65 | 474.68 | 886.08 |

Table 10 shows that the young adults' suicide rate declined over time in an individualistic society, especially after 2000. This echoed the changes in a tight-knit society and the loose-knit society. Irregular changes occurred in the suicide rate of the middle-aged as the male suicide rate went down and then up again and the female suicide rate went up and then down to zero. Suicides among older adults grew from a very low level in the 1980s to an extremely high level in the 2000s, which arguably contributed to the total increase of suicide rates. See Table 11 for gender-specific data on the elderly's five-year suicide rate.

***Table 11*** The elderly's five-year suicide rate by gender (1/100,000)

| Five-year period | 1980– | 1985– | 1990– | 1995– | 2000– | 2005– |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 0.00 | 203.39 | 135.59 | 745.76 | 1016.95 | 1830.51 |
| Female | 0.00 | 63.29 | 126.58 | 822.78 | 1075.95 | 696.20 |
| Total | 0.00 | 130.93 | 130.93 | 785.60 | 1047.46 | 1243.86 |

Table 11 shows that the 1995–2009 period witnessed a sharp increase in the suicide rates among the elderly men and women. The suicide rates for elderly men and women in 1995–1999 was 4.5 times and 5.5 times higher respectively than those in 1990–1994. Between 2000 and 2009, the suicide rate rose significantly except for a decline among the elderly women in 2005–2009. And the rate in 2005–2009 was 10 times higher than that in 1985–1989 and in 1990–1994.

All in all, later-life suicide was pronounced in an individualistic society from 1995 to 2009, a sharp contrast to the wave of suicides among young women in a tight-knit society from 1980 to 1995. One of the questions to be addressed in this chapter is the cause of the rising suicide trend among the elderly.

## 3.2 Changes in the Proportions of Different Types of Suicide Over Time

Changes in suicide rates were to some extent consistent with those in suicide types. We have known in a tight-knit society and the loose-knit society, suicide of despair by the elderly was top among all suicide types after 2000 with altruistic suicide and vengeful suicide that show strong kinship bonds and regulatory control ranking as the lowest. In an individualistic society characterized by weak kinship bonds and regulatory control, egoistic suicide and suicide of despair were supposed to take larger shares; and that was the case in reality as we have revealed in a comparison of suicide types in the previous section. Then how did the proportions of the different types of suicide change over time? See Table 12 for details.

***Table 12*** Distribution of different types of suicide by decade in an individualistic society (%)

| Decade | Suicide type | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Egotistic suicide | Altruistic suicide | Suicide of despair | Vengeful suicide |
| 1980–1989 | 70.83 | 0.00 | 29.17 | 0.00 |
| 1990–1999 | 56.82 | 2.27 | 40.91 | 0.00 |
| 2000–2009 | 44.00 | 0.00 | 54.67 | 1.33 |

Table 12 shows that apart from a few sporadic cases, altruistic suicide and vengeful suicide were almost negligible in all periods. As we have repeatedly emphasized, we focus on trends, rather than occasional cases. Of course, it would be another matter if such sporadic cases are so typical as to affect the suicide trend, for example, the two cases we cited before concerning suicide of despair over survival problems in a tight-knit society. It can be learned from the table that egoistic suicide occupied an overwhelming share, and suicide of despair took less than a third in the 1980s. And in the 1990s, the former decreased rapidly as the later grew, thus narrowing the gap between them. Between 2000 and 2009, suicide of despair ranked first, followed by egoistic suicide. And we will further analyze these changes by five-year period, on the basis of the statistics in Table 13.

***Table 13*** Distribution of different types of suicide by five-year period in an individualistic society (%)

| Five-year period | Ideal type | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Egotistic suicide | Altruistic suicide | Suicide of despair | Vengeful suicide |
| 1980– | 75.00 | 0.00 | 25.00 | 0.00 |
| 1985– | 66.67 | 0.00 | 33.33 | 0.00 |
| 1990– | 78.57 | 0.00 | 21.43 | 0.00 |
| 1995– | 46.67 | 3.33 | 50.00 | 0.00 |
| 2000– | 52.94 | 0.00 | 47.06 | 0.00 |
| 2005– | 36.59 | 0.00 | 60.98 | 2.44 |

Table 13 shows that the trend of suicide in the three decades can be best captured by the changes between the two 15-year periods around the wave of suicide. Between 1980 and

1994, egoistic suicide represented the largest proportion, followed by suicide of despair, and both of them remained fairly steady and fluctuated only slightly. Beginning from 1995, the proportion of suicide of despair rose markedly and that of egoistic suicide fell significantly. And from 2005 to 2009, the distribution of suicide was quite different from that in the first fifteen years as the proportion of egoistic suicide declined from three quarters to slightly over one-third and that of suicide of despair was up from one quarter to about two thirds. As the two ideal types can be further divided into six empirical types, more information will be revealed in Table 14.

***Table 14*** Distribution of major types of suicide by five-year period in an individualistic society (%)

| Five-year period | Ideal type and empirical type | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Egoistic suicide | | | Suicide of despair | | |
| | Evade | End suffering | Vent anger | Value | Marriage and relationship problems | Survival problems |
| 1980– | 50.00 | 0.00 | 25.00 | 0.00 | 25.00 | 0.00 |
| 1985– | 33.33 | 8.33 | 25.00 | 0.00 | 16.67 | 16.67 |
| 1990– | 0.00 | 14.29 | 64.29 | 0.00 | 14.29 | 7.14 |
| 1995– | 3.33 | 20.00 | 23.33 | 0.00 | 3.33 | 46.67 |
| 2000– | 0.00 | 44.12 | 8.82 | 0.00 | 2.94 | 44.12 |
| 2005– | 7.32 | 26.83 | 2.44 | 2.44 | 4.88 | 53.66 |

According to the table, suicide of despair over value was negligible, despite its prominent proportion in the other two societies. Egoistic suicide to evade and suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems, which used to took a significant share, showed a downward trend, and stayed at a very low level. Egoistic suicide to vent anger maintained stable share before 1990 and then shrunk rapidly after 2000. Egoistic suicide to end suffering rose from a low level in 1995 to a high level 2005 and then decreased markedly. And suicide of despair over survival problems showed the biggest change as it gradually took the largest share in the late 2000s.

In light of rankings, egoistic suicide to evade ranked the top in the early 1980s, followed by egoistic suicide to vent anger and suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems in a tie for second place. In the five years that followed, egoistic suicides to evade and to vent anger remained the two most frequent types of suicide, but suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems reduced to the third place due to increases in the proportions of egoistic suicide to end suffering and suicide of despair over survival problems.

According to our previous analysis of suicide rates by age and time period and of distribution of empirical types of suicide in the 1980s, suicide was more common among young adults during the period in an individualistic society. This trend of suicide was in line with those of the tight-knit society and the loose-knit society. The high frequency of egoistic suicide to evade in 1980–1989 indicates that farmers who needed to adapt from a planned economy to a market economy faced social pressure within and beyond their families. Though the pressure was not as great as that placed on their counterparts in a loose-knit society that is featured with stronger kinship bonds and regulatory control, it reflected a problem shared by different societies at that time.

In the early 1990s, except for a sudden surge in egoistic suicide to vent anger, the other suicide types showed no remarkable gap in frequency. This shows that 1990–1994 was a transition period before a turn emerged after 1995, evidenced by a sharp decrease in egoistic suicide to evade, a sudden surge of suicide of despair over survival problems and significant growth of egoistic suicide to end suffering.

Between 2000 and 2009 the proportions of the empirical types experienced a reversal and then gradually stabilized. Egoistic suicide to end suffering and suicide of despair over survival problems took dominant positions with the latter continuing to rise. This reflects the

end of the transition in an individualistic society with the highest suicide rate seen not among young adults as in the early years but among the elderly.

A comparison with tight-knit society and loose-knit society shows in terms of suicide of despair over survival problems among the elderly, all three societies tended to exhibit a similar trend. Therefore, understanding the mechanism behind suicides in an individualistic society is crucial for us to understand the evolution of suicide in rural China in the next two decades.

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# 4 Mechanism for Farmer Suicide in an Individualistic Society

## 4.1 Changes in Kinship Bonds and Farmer Suicide

We will deal with changes in kinship bonds from two aspects.

The first is kinship bonds beyond the nuclear family. There are strong kinship bonds beyond nuclear families in both tight-knit society and loose-knit society, as exemplified by clans that included families related within five generations or more in a tight-knit society and smaller kinship groups consisting of families related within three generations in a loose-knit society. In the tight-knit society, the clan would seek justice for young women and the elderly who committed suicide. For example, in the third chapter, we discussed how fellow villagers avenged a woman's death (*darenming*) and how a clan punished those responsible for an old man's suicide. In the loose-knit society, people were less likely to seek justice on behalf of self-slayers, but sometimes a kinship group would intervene, which was conducive to discouraging suicidal thoughts.

However, these interventions only took place in an individualistic society before 1949 when clans exercised great influence, each having their own ancestral shrines and genealogy books. This, however, came to an end after 1949. For example, during the land reform, ancestral graves in large numbers were reclaimed for agrarian use. And during the campaign to Destroy the Four Olds, ancestral shrines were demolished or converted into schools and village government offices. Though the disintegration of the people's commune system endowed farmers with more freedom under the market economy system, an individualistic society did not see a partial revival of clans as the other two societies did. After 1949, people who had previously lived in clans were reorganized into new collective units, resulting in a new connection between them. This connection was by no means the kinship bond, but it could play an important role in helping vulnerable groups. New units like production brigades and production teams were able to reconcile conflicts within families like those on filial responsibilities. Typically in the 1960s when conflicts between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law were widespread, production brigades or teams, representatives of local authorities, would hold classes for abusive mothers-in-law and disrespectful daughters-in-law. Mothers-in-law would be taught new ideas fit for the new era like gender equality. Daughters-in-law, however, were taught something different–traditional ethics which were often associated with "feudal ideology" at that time. While full obedience was not required, they were asked to show filial piety for parents-in-law and respect for other family members. Therefore, in terms of power structures, the disintegration of original structure did not make a difference in a short run because a new structure took its place.

When the new structure disintegrated too, the tight-knit society and the loose-knit society where clans were largely or partially revived, were in a position to maintain village order by resorting to traditions. In contrast, nuclear families became the basic units in an individualistic society where clans were not revived. In terms of ideal types, the predecessor of an individualistic society was either a unified or loose-knit society. However, in the past years, especially the three decades after 1949, the society was in a process of disunity. The result was not a society built on "organic solidarity" as Durkheim (2000) called it, but more like corporations he advocated in his book *On Suicide* (Durkheim, 1996). And it was known

as village community in the context of China. The reform and opening up in the early 1980s caused the village community to disintegrate and discouraged the formation of society with high cohesion like those before 1949. Therefore, an individualistic society was formed with nuclear families becoming the basic unit of kinship bonds. The family affairs on which village collectives might previously have a say were now private matters to nuclear families. One of them was suicide. For example, before 1949, it was normal to see that suicide among older adults would be handled by the clan, like the clan penalizing Ke Han for his father's death in a tight-knit society. As a result, it is assumed that elderly suicide seldom happened before 1949. In a collective community, officials of production brigades and production teams would step in if suicide occurred. After the early 1980s, suicides like that by Ke Han's father would be intervened by the clan in a tight-knit society, but in an individualistic society, those became private matters within nuclear families. This will be explained in further detail in Case 4.1.

**Case 4.1**

In Shu village, Yingcheng city, an old man surnamed Shu died at 70 by suicide in 1987.

Shu had two sons and one daughter and as he could not make a living by himself, he lived with his sons. In one spring festival, the two sons decided to support their father in turn for one month. It seems like the two sons observed the highest local standard of filial piety but actually neither were willing to take care of their father.

In the first lunar month, the father lived with his second son and with his older son the next month. All went well until the third lunar month. When he came back to his second son, his son rejected and said that he should live with his elder brother. The father was confused and asked "isn't today the first day of the third month?" His son answered that the second month had 28 days, and he would have to provide two more days' food if his father came on the first day. But if his father came the next day, both sons would share the burden equally for 29 days. The old man didn't want to leave. However, his daughter-in-law scolded him for idling in their house in the first lunar month (actually people rarely worked in this month because of the Spring Festival) but helping the older son take care of his cattle in the second month. And she continued to blame him for his partiality towards the older son, and forced him to leave. Unable to tolerate those scoldings, the old man left for his elder son with his clothes. But his eldest daughter-in-law did not allow him in, saying it's none of their business that the second month had only 28 days. She continued that when the two sons decided to care for him in turn, they did not discuss the number of days at all and why the second son had not brought this up at that time? The old man explained he had already been accused of helping them keep animals and hoped she make compromise (for he indeed helped his oldest son a lot in the second month). She was even more angry, blaming him for being partial to his second son rather than the elder son since he had cared for the second son's children during the people's commune period. The helpless old man had to go back to his own hut and had nothing to eat for the rest of the day. The next day, the elder son told his father to live with him as he thought that his father could help with herding and child care while avoiding troubles with his brother. In the afternoon, the second son came, fetch his father. When the old man refused, he blamed his father for trying to help the elder son. The old man had to go with him. On the third day, the second son asked his father to herd in the morning but prepared no lunch for him as a punishment for his partiality. And this old man was underfed again after herding in the afternoon. He then asked his elder son for some food, and was given cold shoulder as his elder son was annoyed that his father hadn't go home with him. In despair this old man came to his second son's house and hanged himself at night.

This old man's death did not cause much of a stir and people just talked casually of it. No clan members stepped in to seek justice for him (In fact, there was no clan in Yingcheng city. Nuclear family was the basic unit of society and no closer interest or kinship group existed beyond it). The elder son asked his children to tell his sister that their father was bedridden for a week and might die soon. At the entrance of the village, she heard her father had

hanged himself, so she went home directly. Finally, the funeral was hastily arranged. That's it.

Case 4.1 shows a typical case of elderly suicide due to despair over survival problems. Although the suicide of despair is the result of the weakened regulatory control, this case also reflects weak kinship bonds. Further analysis of this case will follow up later. And the reason why this case was first introduced here is to illustrate that no group beyond the nuclear family intervened in the suicide by this old man. No village community provided support, neither did other people within the clan. The whole story was just about the old man, his two sons and two daughters-in-law.

Without intervention from the unit outside the nuclear family, suicides happened between couples and generations. But inter-generational conflicts do not mean that consanguineous units go beyond the nuclear family. They reflect more about mismatch between generations' expectations for inter-generational relationships. When a number of large consanguineous groups like clans and kin groups disintegrated, the elderly, the majority of suicide victims in an individualistic society, could only rely on their children. So whether support from their children prevented them from committing suicide? The answer is that the elderly not only received no support, but also killed themselves due to conflicts with their children. Next, we will discuss changed inter-generational relationship and its link with elder suicide in an individualistic society.

We have analyzed that the elderly killed themselves for diseases and dilemmas of old-age support. They could only rely on their children to resolve these two problems since they were less or hardly capable of feeding themselves, worsened by the reduced intervention from the country since the household-responsibility system was put in place. As the elderly lost control over their children and there was no hard mechanism to force children to support their parents, the elderly could do nothing but either died decently by killing themselves or succumbing to disease or starving to death.

Inter-generational relationships were like the "feedback mode" proposed by Fei (1998), which refers to that parents bring up children and children will support them in return in later years. However, the elderly who killed themselves or experienced the trend of suicide did bring up their children to the best of their ability, but they received little "feedback" from their children, emotionally or materially. Without the feedback from children, this traditional feedback model was turned into "exploitation model", namely, children exploiting their parents until they got old, came to a dead end and committed suicide over survival problems.

Changes in inter-generational relationships did not happen overnight. And the finished "exploitation model" would cause more suicide deaths among the elderly. But before that the dominant position of parents over their children did make the children uncomfortable in the "feedback mode". In rural China, it was shown by conflicts between mothers- and daughters-in-law (also between fathers- and daughters-in-law). For example, in a tight-knit society the loose-knit society, during conflicts between mothers- and daughters-in-law from the 1890s to the early 1990s, mothers-in-law seldom killed themselves, however, young daughters-in-law committed suicide (Liu and Wang 2010). The situation was the same in an individualistic society, which led to the high suicide rate among the young adults in the same period. After the middle and late 1990s, the situation completely reversed. Most commonly, old-age mothers-in-law or fathers-in-law committed suicide due to their respective conflicts with daughters-in-law, and young daughters-in-law seldom killed themselves. As we analyzed before, conflicts between parents-in-law and daughters-in-law often accompanied with conflicts between parents and their sons.

By decade, conflicts between parents-in-law and daughters-in-law remained severe between the 1960s and 1970s rather than after the middle and late 1990s, evidenced by several lessons held for mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law at that time. Then, the transition to market economy system in the 1980s led to the decline of the economic status of the elderly in household production and completed the shift of control over inter-generational relationships. In other words, the elderly lost their natural authorities over

adult children. Besides this, more importantly, both parents and children became more independent ideally. The “ideally” refers to certain conditions, which means that the elderly are capable of feeding and caring themselves, and they don’t need to rely on their children. Once they lose such capabilities, they have nothing to do but are at the mercy of their children. Strengthened independence in fact weakens degree of kinship bonds between generations. As degree of kinship bonds beyond the nuclear family weakened, villages were scattered like potatoes in one plant, thus the most prominent feature of an individualistic society coming into being.

As inter-generational relationships changed, parents and their children lost their sense of responsibility toward each other and were indifferent to their families. As a result, egoistic suicide took place more often and the foundation was laid for the suicide of despair. There were two reasons behind egoistic suicides. On the one hand, children refused to shoulder responsibilities that they had when the kinship bond was strong, such as old-age care, care for sick family members, and emotional comfort. On the other hand, parents who committed egoistic suicide thought only of themselves without worrying whether their children would take the blame for their suicides. Obviously, in a tight-knit society and the loose-knit society, parents who faced with the same dilemma of illness and old-age care, would ask the clan or the kin group for help. Even without asking, people within the same clan would stand out and provide them with humanitarian (or more appropriate, familistic) assistance. Although there were egoistic suicide cases, these people kill themselves because they were too afraid of the strong sense of responsibility. In an individualistic society, however, egoistic suicide to end suffering that seldom took place in these two societies indeed took place.

Two typical cases will help us better understand changes in suicide types as a result of changed inter-generational relationships.

**Case 4.2**

The chairman of the Fang village committee in Yingcheng city was well-off with a small yet impressive cottage. But his father lived by himself and died by jumping into the water after being diagnosed with lung cancer in the hospital at 72. Generally speaking, few people would take it as a suicide. During my interviews with villagers, I was often asked “whether this is a kind of suicide?” These villagers thought this type of death was natural death. Since the death would eventually come, the suicide was an alternative way for death by illness. In fact, when the village secretary of the party and the chairman recalled suicide cases after my illustration of definition of the suicide, they said curiously that the number of suicides would be high if those who got sick and killed themselves by drinking pesticide or jumping into the water were taken into account. And the chairman said that his father’s death was literally a kind of death by suicide.

**Case 4.3**

In Luo village, Yingcheng city, an old man surnamed Luo died by drinking pesticide. At first, he had a good health but his wife got sick while their sons stood idle by and daughters visited them rarely. So he had to care for his wife by himself. He usually tilled his own land and plant vegetables, and sometimes worked for the waist drum team in town to make money. In early 2004, he got sick. As he was too weak to work for the drum team, the team asked him to rest at home for the sake of safety. When he came back home, he thought that he was unable to care for his wife and even for himself without the source of allowance. And he and his wife decided to drink pesticide. At first, his wife agreed. Then he bought a bottle of pesticide from the town and split it into two bowls after dinner. When he said to his wife “let’s drink it and die together”, his wife sniffed it and denied to drink for wanting to live more. Then he said “I drink it! And I die, leaving you alone, and sons may take care of you**.** If we’re all alive, only add more burden to them”. He then drank both two bowls of pesticide and died immediately.

…

The above ellipses mean that the rest of egoistic suicides are largely similar to case 4.3 and there is no need to list them all.

Both case 4.2 and 4.8 are cases of egoistic suicide to end suffering. Victims who committed this type of suicide were meant to reduce pain, physically and emotionally. In fact, of 42 cases of egoistic suicide in an individualistic society, 27 cases, or 64.29%, happened to the elderly due to the illness, among which the elderly killed themself to end suffering, and 11 cases, or 26.9%, happened to older adults who were healthy before death and they committed suicide for venting anger. In general, the major type of suicide among the elderly was egoistic suicide to end suffering, whose overwhelming position indicates that there was a social foundation for the elderly to choose to kill themselves. This foundation was the weakened kinship bond we mentioned before. More specifically, children were less responsible for their parents and parents were less likely to think of their children. This weakened kinship bond can be better understood in following comparisons.

In the tight-knit society, the elderly who suffered from pain seldom committed suicide because of strong kinship bonds. In other words, children would be responsible for their parents by providing basic necessity of life. For parents with illness, on the one hand, they would be supported by their children in treatment. And on the other hand, despite poor therapeutic effects, they would not kill themselves to end suffering for the sake of the reputation of their children. In an individualistic society, the situation was totally different. Indifference between parents and children prevented them from thinking of each other. As a result, children, by all means, avoided their responsibility for old-age care, intensifying old-aged people's suicidal attempts. And parents, who were faced with indifference from their children, knew well that they would suffer more from illness if they did not kill themselves as soon as possible. So they were open to suicide, in contrast to their counterparts in the unite society who had more considerations. You may wonder that what extra sufferings parents would take beyond those from the illness if their children did not support them in treatment? Let's answer this question with an extreme case, see case 4.4.

**Case 4.4**

In Shu village, Yongcheng city, a man aged 70-plus with the last name Shu was sick. His children not only did not support him in treatment but also intentionally starved him to death by providing no food and water from the December 24, 2008 lunar calendar, for fear of his death during the spring festival bring bad luck to the family. When he was conscious, he threw his excrement from bed to the window and the door to show his anger. And in the end he breathed his last breath at the first day of the New Year.

This extreme case shows a bitter pill the elderly had to swallow if they did not kill themselves in an extreme situation. In fact, this old man was hardly alone. In Shu village and Cai village, three other men with the last name Shu were also starved to death. These bloody and cruel realities are like a hammer that hits other old-age people who have the same dilemma, warning that they would die like the old man in case 4.4 in the worst-case scenario. These four men's deaths are far from egotistic suicide deaths. But they can be counted as deaths caused by suicide of despair over survival problems from the perspective of suicide, which will be discussed in the next section. And it is more suitable to define them as homicides. With these social facts in mind, the elderly in an individualistic society had no expectations of care from their children and knew exactly their fate after they got sick.

The above-mentioned suicide cases further show the extremely week kinship bond beyond nuclear families in an individualistic society as no family members would like to support the aged in trouble. This week bond was the structural foundation for many egoistic suicides in the same society. And strangely, it was almost impossible to receive official and institutional support from production brigades and production teams. And even one of the cases we analyzed before was the death of the main village official's parent. And more similar cases will unfold. Some old-age people who killed themselves had been party veterans and main village officials. They were unable to save others' lives as officials and even could not save their own lives. As grass-root representatives under official systems,

they could not escape from the fate of suicide like an iron order to obey in their later life. As a result, ordinary villagers were much less likely to receive support from the outside.

## 4.2 Links Between Weakened Degree of Regulatory Control and Farmer Suicides

As the weakened degree of kinship bonds led to the increase in egotistic suicides, the weakened degree of regulatory control caused more despairing suicide deaths, which, of course, had something to do with the weakened degree of kinship bonds. But for the sake of analysis, we draw a line between these two types of suicide caused by weakened degree of kinship bonds and degree of regulatory control respectively in order to better understand mechanisms behind them.

As we stressed before, it is essential to understand elderly suicide in an individualistic society. From the perspective of degree of regulatory control, we will focus on the following three aspects. First, the filial piety that maintains good later life of the elderly. Second, the elderly's perception of suicide. Third, what are the finished degree of regulatory control and their roles in later-life suicide.

Previous studies on filial piety mainly focused on its decline. And I would like to analyze the filial piety in an individualistic society from traditional discussions over filial piety**.**

Meaning of Sacrifices, the chapter 24 of *The Book of Rites*, states Zongzi's words of piety filial, which highlights its core content. He said that "there are three levels to filial piety, which are, in descending order, displaying utmost reverence, protecting their honour and providing and caring for them." He also said that "it is easy to provide parents, harder to respect them but it is possible, and harder to respect them for life. After parent's decease, children can continue to behave themselves without disgracing their parents. It is the filial piety for life." According to traditional Confucianism, filial pity can be defined horizontally and vertically, namely, its three levels and practices of these levels in life. Horizontally, it is difficult to respect parent, the middle level of filial piety, and more difficult to observe the high level of filial piety after parents die. But it is possible to provide for parents during lifetime.

So what is the version of filial piety in an individualistic society? Let's look at several typical elderly suicide cases first and then make a brief summary.

**Case 4.5**

In Luo village, Yingcheng city, an old women committed suicide. She had four sons and all got married except the oldest one, with whom this old woman lived. In one summer, she was confined to bed by illness, twisted and moaned with agony. When the youngest son came to see her, she was so painful that became edgy and blamed her sons for providing no treatment. So her youngest son replied that "why are you feeling irritable? How painful are you? Now that you're annoyed and painful, there is pesticide. You can just drink it and you will stop being so edgy and painful, won't you?" Then, he leaved. The oldest son was there and he thought that his brother's words are right, yet in a wrong manner. So he said nothing and leaved with his brother. As he said goodbye to his brother and went back to the house, his mother had drunk a whole bottle of pesticide named as "Big Bees".

I asked him whether it was his brother's fault. He denied and said that his brother should not have said in that indifferent way otherwise his mother would not die by drinking pesticide. But he thought it was just a matter of time for his mother's death. Even without these words, she would stay alive for about another month. During our interview, it seems like that he was indifferent to his mother's death, so I said that at least she is your mother. I never thought that he would respond that "My brother said in a wrong way, but my mother may die soon because she was over seventy years old and got sick. And she just died in a different way. What can I do? Should I really drive my brother, beat or even stab him to deaths? It (this intervention) doesn't make sense. As she would did eventually, it is not bad for my mother, although with a certain notoriety as a self-slayer. What can I do with my brother? My mother died, shall I care about the dead instead of the living?"

**Case 4.6**

In Peng village, Yingcheng city, Peng Qingshan died by drinking pesticide at the age of 70 in 2000. He had two sons and one daughter. His daughter was married, so was his oldest son who had kids and a good family condition. He lived alone after his wife passed away. Unable to work, he asked his married son for food while he never asked his unmarried son for food because his son had to feed by himself. But his oldest son and daughter-in-law either gave him no food or provided little food in a delay time. In the summer of 2000, Peng Qingshan had no food to eat. So he asked his oldest son and daughter-in-law for help. And the quarrel broke out as they blamed him for eating too quickly. He argued that the food was not enough. Then, they denied to give him food. He said that he would rather die than live without food. So he went back home and drunk a bottle of pesticide that was slightly poisonous for insect pest control on plants. As he drunk a lot, when the pesticide run its course, he did not die immediately but was too painful to roll on the ground until he went topless and his body became swollen and turned red. Seeing this, the oldest son and daughter-in-law was scared and run away instead of saving their father. And neighbors who usually stood idle by, of course, did not intervene as they see his son did nothing. They saw how this old man rolled to death. One of them was the former village secretary. He said that Peng Qingshan was so big that kicked a large piece of mud down. And there was nothing that he could do but watched him die.

…

The ellipses here also indicate that most cases are so similar that there is no need to list here. In broad terms, others committed suicide because they received no food after asking for it. They either hanged themselves, drank pesticide or drowned. Some who found that water was too shallow to drown them then crawled back to the silt-rich bank and froze to death. Words cannot describe theses horrifying deaths. Although local villagers talked about these deaths in a jovial mood and I was sometimes amused by their humorous words after more contacts, I cannot control my feelings and had to stop writing when I came back and was alone.

In three levels of filial piety, it was impossible to display utmost reverence and protect parents' honour in an individualistic society. However, it was often to see that children abused and beat their parents. A popular saying has it that parents are of a punching bag for their children. And it seemed natural for sons and daughters-in-law to abuse parents when life was in discord. There is also a question mark over the lowest level of filial piety, providing and caring for parents. Case 4.6 shows that the old man was forced to move into the fast lane of death after his basic need could not be met. Except these three levels, the sacrifice is also a measure of filial piety. A Summary Account of Sacrifices, the chapter 25 of *The Book of Rites*, states that "it is by sacrifice that the nourishment of parents is followed up and filial duty to them perpetuated. Therefore in three ways is a filial son's service to his parents shown—while they are alive, by nourishing them; when they are dead, by all the rites of mourning; and when the mourning is over by sacrificing to them. In his nourishing them we see his natural obedience; in his funeral rites we see his sorrow; in his sacrifices we see his reverence. In these three ways we see the practice of a filial son."

In an individualistic society, according to these standards, a filial son was far from this. And the funereal was extremely simple. Instead of mourning for the elderly, children seemed to celebrate the death with entertainment. And only those relatively filial children would conduct funerals. In most cases, funeral services would be performed by a Taoist priest before the deceased would be buried. Although funerals were conducted through a large-scale cooperation in a business like manner in many other regions, funerals were taken as private matters with little participation in Yingcheng city. As a result, the number of Taoist priests increasingly decreased. After the 1990s, the trend of entertained funeral reduced the demand for a Taoist priest. In the administrative areas of Yingbei village, there were only two priests who were both born after 1931 in Tao village and Cai village respectively. It is expected that the funeral will be simplified further after two priests pass away. "Since there are priests, children will invite them to hold the funeral for fear that others say there

are too poor to afford a priest". "The funeral is conducted for fun and for the sake of the living. As the dead has been dead and we do not believe in gods and ghosts, the funeral is conducted for the sake of our faces. Otherwise, who else would like to afford a band? As the dead rest in the dust, all these are meaningless to them." These were consensus of interviewees. And what about the grave visiting, one of the activities of sacrifice? Local villagers usually visited the tombs during Qingming festival. Visitors were mainly sons, sometimes daughters. Daughters-in-law and later generations seldom took a visit. Sons who worked in cities took no visits neither. By contrast, during Qingming, people who emerged in clusters visited the tombs of their ancestors and pray to their ancestors in a tight-knit society. When it comes to the monument, nearly 60% tombs in an individualistic society had no monuments. Villagers said that "why do we spend that money? The dead were dead. It's totally enough that we remember where their tombs are as later generations are not interested in this." The existed monuments were inscribed only with names of the dead's children and grandchildren, and later generations' names left no presence. As a result, people beyond three generations or even two did not know where ancestral tombs are. All can be boiled down into one sentence that there was no ancestor worship, a kind of lifestyle for Chinese people, and memories about ancestors appertained within three to four generations.

The tight-knit society and an individualistic society are at the two extremes in this regard. In the former society, the ancestor worship was prevalent and had a long history. When people talked about their ancestors, they could date back to 400 years ago. However, in an individualistic society, few clearly knew about their ancestors' stories beyond three generations. People in a loose-knit society who fell in between had memories of ancestors that were shorter than those in a tight-knit society, but that happened within five generations were well in their hands. And the culture of ancestor worship and funerals were stronger than those in an individualistic society, evidenced by the grave circle we discussed in relevant section. Therefore, in the united and the loose-knit society, it was prevalent to see children provide for parents, although in a decline trend. But few people would starve their parents to death or contribute to their parents' suicide by withholding support**.** These people, yet in small numbers**,** would be condemned by other villagers as no one took those indifference as normal. But in an individualistic society, it would be normal for children not to provide for their parents. What's worse, it became a lifestyle that everyone took for granted and assumed was perfectly acceptable. For those who were filial, they might be seen as crossing the line.

You may wonder whether people in an individualistic society were too poor to support their parents. In fact, local villagers, regardless of age, all held this view. Sons and daughters-in-law argued that they could not provide food because of great financial burdens. And the elderly with thoughts of suicide believed that their children had a lot going on in their lives and no time to care for them. And some were convinced they were a financial liability, and it would be better to kill themselves so they would no longer be a burden on their children. When we dug deeper, the elderly, somewhat unexpectedly, said that their sons and daughters-in-law were mean. It was fairly common to see this paradoxical attitude among the elderly. And children of those who died by suicide said that "we did not support our parents, because we could not afford it." So which side is closer to the truth? I believe the answer can be found from two contexts. First, in a local context, and second, in a broader context.

First, in a local context. According to my field trip, villagers seemed to find out problems in their practices only when they were asked by outsiders like us. But they denied those problems. The excuse of adding burdens to children was so weak for both the elderly and their children in the face of objective truth of the large number of elderly suicides. As a large spending or unpredictable amount of money costed by the treatment is burdensome, it is relatively not a burden for children to give their parents food. When Doctor Chen Xun (from Center for China Rural Governance, Huazhong University of Science and Technology) and I took a trip to Tao village, we had a rap session with many villagers in front of the store

of former village sectary where many people would come to buy household products or play mahjong. When villagers figured out what we were doing, they also shared their views during our discussions with villager secretary. The first view they held was that elderly suicide was normal as at least one case in a production team, or literally almost all the elderly killed themselves to death. But no one would care much about these “private matters”. Therefore, all deaths, little known by the public, were treated as natural deaths. The second view was that there was no need to make such a big fuss over elderly suicide. There were six men aged around 50 who said that “it is our way to go when we get old.” The third view was about poverty, which means children had too much burdens to provide for their parents. Let’s put aside the first two views for a while and look at the third view. It can be boiled down into one sentence that if they had money, the elderly would not die. They agreed with this. And we further asked them whether old-age people would not kill themselves if governments provide them with food? They shook hands and we asked them about the reason. They said that food was not enough because care was needed for those who cannot feed themselves. So we said does that means sons like you should be paid to care for parents? That replied “That’s it. If we get more pay, we can even hire a care worker too stand in for our absence.” we pursued, “when you don’t want to care for your parents, who will stand in for you?” They offered awkward smiles and said something we found funny and frustrated, “In the end, we all have to drink pesticide to kill ourselves.” This shows that money was not the only problem and a huge financial burden was an excuse.

On the micro level, suppose the needs of food are met, who will make the food into meals and ensure that the elderly can eat meals to sustain metabolism and stay alive? Generally, problems for labour shortage may be singled out from the perspective of rural migrant economy. In fact, in the united and the loose-knit society, the agricultural work was so little that even people aged above 50 needed to work in cities for a short term to make more money. So it was harder for them to care for their parents at home. But according to our data, although large numbers of people migrated to work in cities, most old-age people could be provided for. In an individualistic society, people aged above 50 stayed at home because of great agricultural work and a significant portion of available arable lands while mainly young people aged below 30 worked in cities. And this society was located in plain, leading to high level of agricultural mechanization with tractors, rice transplanters, harvesters, the adoption of seedling-throwing technique and herbicides. Therefore, the amount of labour was smaller than that before the 1980s, and then that in a tight-knit society and the loose-knit society. Villagers had more extra time after agricultural work. They did not use these spare time to care for the elderly but to engage in recreational activities.

By this token, filial piety in an individualistic society broke down. What was the specific filial piety and its mechanism in an individualistic society with Yingcheng city at its center? Filial piety of Yingcheng city was a marketed filial piety based on rational calculation by market logic, in contrast to that of Daye city.

Marketed filial piety was far away from our original understanding of it. Academically, our studies on the decline of filial piety are not an attack to convey moral emotions but to convey this social fact objectively. This type of filial piety was not indigenous but a product of long-term modernization in this area.

Marketed filial piety is based on rational calculation and excludes traditional code of conducts based on kinship bonds.

Case 4.1 is a perfect example. People who lived in the marketed filial piety system, were less being seen as cruel or going against morals. In fact, they were moral in their eyes. For example, sons in case 4.1 disputed over who should care for their father for one more day. They took this calculation for granted and calculated all things more than days of care, and they even haggled over their father’s help with herding and babysitting. In this system, they practiced economy in everything from these trivial things to budget of treatment of diseases for their parents. But in a tight-knit society like Daye city, people would try their best to support their parents in treatment. The reason was simple. Because it was a “must” to

provide for parents and support them in treatment. They and villagers of Jingshan city were on the same page regarding this.

Many children would budget for their support for their parents in treatment. In an extreme way, they would calculate between the treatment cost and economic benefits their parents may create after cure. If economic benefits were greater, they would provide support, otherwise they would give up their parents. This explains why the number of elderly suicide in Yingcheng city were higher than that in Daye city, despite older adults' similarity on fitness level. A middle-aged woman whom I interviewed with many times said that if an old man gets sick, and it might take 30,000 RMB and 10 years to cure, and then she would calculate whether this man would produce 3000 RMB per year (includes the value of light physical work like herding and raising ducks calculated by labour cost). If 3000 yuan per year could be generated by the old man, she would provide support in treatment. If the calculation result is 2000 yuan or the old man would die in two or three years after cure, she would leave the old man alone. Knowing well these calculations of their children, many old-age people would take the hint and the initiative in killing themselves at proper times.

It was basically accepted among the elderly their children's calculations over them. Therefore, the only right forward for the elderly who cannot work and care by themselves was to commit suicide. In an individualistic society, people took it granted that the elderly who could not generate any economic benefit must die, which was the legitimacy of elderly suicide in this society.

Under this system of rules, elderly suicide would not receive compassion or relief. So I think an individualistic society had no social foundation for the altruistic suicide or vengeful suicide. Individual cases of these two suicides did happen but in general trend, main types of suicide were egotistic suicide and suicide of despair. And most of the elderly who committed egotistic suicide were to end suffering, in contrast to their counterparts who killed themselves due to a strong sense of responsibility or great social stress based on strong kinship bonds in other two societies. In the same vein, the elderly who died by suicide of despair over survival problems killed themselves for illnesses and survival dilemmas while their counterparts mainly committed suicide of despair over value and suicide of despair over marriage and relationship problems caused by strong rules. This led to the large number of the elderly who were sick and unable to work among the elderly suicide victims.

## 4.3 Weakened Regulatory Control and Farmers' Suicide

In an individualistic society, the elderly who committed suicide before 1949 could still expect support from clan members, which was similar to the case of Ke Han's father in the third chapter. At that time, there were clans and ancestral shrines. Unfilial sons who contributed to their parents' deaths would be punished in ancestral shines by spanking, recalled the elderly. The tight-knit society witnessed similar punishments. In the worst-case scenario, both an individualistic society and the tight-knit society saw a symbolic punishment of pretending to immolate sons on their parents' funeral pyre by sons lying down in coffins. But social structures of these two societies changed in different way after 1949.

After 1949, political campaigns took place in rural areas. And villagers' memories of ancestors were greatly affected by the land reform when ancestral graves were reclaimed for arable lands and the campaign to Destroy the Four Olds when ancestral shrines were overthrown into ruins or rebuild into schools. Some scholars had insightful studies on the impact of political campaigns on local villagers. For example, Yan (2006) conducted field work studies on impacts of political campaigns on rural traditional culture in Xiajia village, Heilongjiang province.

In an individualistic society, the direct outcome of political campaigns was many people failed to know their ancestral graves of more than three generations as we discussed before.

But before the reform and opening up, damage of political campaigns' damages to traditional clan culture did not emerge. In other words, elderly suicide in large numbers did

not took place in an individualistic society between 1949 and 1980. I think part of reason was that the country and the community assumed series function of the clan culture, including old-age care and treatment of disease. For example, produce was divided by production team on the basis of 60 or 70% “free supply” and 40 or 30% by labor, in order to ensure old-age people who were unable to work could be distributed with food. Despite low production of food, food was distributed to villagers. Therefore, suicide due to lack of food did not emerge.

As a result of historical serendipity, large-scale ancestral grave mountains were formed in a tight-knit society in Daye city, where ancestral graves of the same family name were built in one mountain. These grave mountains took shape since ancestors had settled there. Therefore, funeral custom here was more organized than scatter funerals in an individualistic society. And these ancestral graves were easy to be protected against damage in political campaigns. Similarly, although ancestral shrines were overthrown into ruins, no new buildings were constructed over there as these places were seen as holy places. After the reform and opening up, old systems broke and new systems established. Clan culture in a tight-knit society was quickly revitalized as shrines emerged from ruins. And without national intervention, degree of kinship bonds and degree of regulatory control were strengthened. However, in an individualistic society, damaged history and culture failed to revive and became the past forever, thus weakened degree of kinship bonds and degree of regulatory control taking shape.

When it comes to later life for the elderly, the community-based care model was shifted back to the family-based care model before 1949. But different clan culture systems required by different family-based care models were kept in different ways. The clan culture system in a tight-knit society could revitalize in a short term and was able to resist against later impacts of the new market rule system. However, the new market rule system overtook an individualistic society and established its dominant role. Therefore, after adaptation period of the 1980s, the serious outcome of social structural changes in two different societies emerged on elderly suicide in large numbers after the 1990s.

The revitalization of clan culture and strengthened degree of kinship bonds and degree of regulatory control in a tight-knit society made the family-based care model possible. As a result, the elderly suicide remained weak. But in an individualistic society, as the clan culture disappeared, the rise of market rules brought about serious outcomes. Because senior citizens were the natural vulnerable group under new market rules because the cultural foundation of family-based care was lost while the market failed to provide the aged with economic foundation to survive. And community-based care model that replaced family model broke down as a result of collapsed old system. So senior citizens who struggled in survival and diseases were regarded as “useless” from the perspective of local market rules. And the “useful” under the market rules means that the ability to produce economic profit to sustain one’s own production and reproduction by selling labor. When old-age people were viewed as “useless”, they could not sell their labour to have access to various resources to sustain themselves from the market. Their destined way out was suicide, except deaths by illness and hunger. In their views, suicide was a decent way to end their lives.

As a result, egotistic suicide to end suffering from illness and suicide of despair over survival problems due to lack of food spread like an epidemic, hanging over and threatening to infect all individuals among an individualistic society. Infected individuals had to undergo the life order of suicide when they grew old. In general, the elderly suicide fell in between, severer than that in a tight-knit society and milder than that in a loose-knit society.

Unfortunately, although the clan culture in a tight-knit society revived after the collapse of the old system in the 1980s, which led to strengthened degree of kinship bonds and degree of regulatory control, it was destroyed unprecedentedly by the tide wave of migrant labour.

As we mentioned before, the dispersed social structure was transformed from previous social transition and had nothing to do with the engagement economy. For other two

societies, they faced with the same dilemma. And the relatively weaker degree of kinship bonds and degree of regulatory control in a loose-knit society led to quicker structural changes and transition to the market rule system of an individualistic society. Changes in kinship bonds can be seen from the shift from the community like the clan and the kin group to a nuclear family type. Although the nuclear family type was not yet in a dominant role, its role came into play as elderly suicide increased in a tight-knit society and an individualistic society in the middle and late 1990s and the similar trend in a loose-knit society.

According to data in the second chapter, elderly suicide in a tight-knit society declined after 2000 because of short-term strengthened degree of kinship bonds and degree of regulatory control thanks to the revitalization of clan culture. Due to the tax-for-fee reform (TFR) in 2002 and the abolition of agricultural taxes in 2005, the tight-knit society in Daye city was struggled with public goods supply. As national intervention faded, the clan was revitalized to achieve community-based public goods supply. But this exceptional measure was temporary.

Without official and systemic interventions from the government, an individualistic society is expected to become another version of a tight-knit society or a loose-knit society after one or two decades.

If the government realized this and adopted a series of official and systemic interventions, elderly suicide would be reduced. Between December 2010 and January 2011 when I surveyed in Yingcheng city, an individualistic society, many older adults asked me when new rural social endowment insurance (NRSEI) policy would be implemented there. I said in one year or two or three years at last. Against all expectations, most of them relied that “Mr. Liu, I would tough it out and hang on for two more years for your words.” I know what they mean between the lines—“if the NRSEI policy is not implemented, we will eat fine dried noodles (hanging themselves) or drink syrup (drink pesticide)!”

As we know, every story has two sides. I do not mean the clan of a tight-knit society or the kin group of a loose-knit society is superior over the nuclear family of an individualistic society based on market rules. In fact, it can be found in the second and third chapter that despite low rate of later-life suicide, young adults suicide, suicide among young married women in particular, was even more tragic. And in an individualistic society where elder suicide was sizable, young adults suicide was less severe. In conclusion, the traditional social structure, which protects the elderly, might put young women at a higher risk of suicide. In contrast, the modern social structure, which might be unfavorable for the elderly, is a protection for young women. And a community-based culture may be a solution to prevent young women and the elderly from committing suicide and protect them from pressures imposed by the traditional lineage system and the modern market respectively.

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# 5. Conclusion

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In summary, this book mainly presents the following findings: (i) at empirical level, differences exist in the time–space distribution of farmers' suicide in China; and (ii) at theoretical level, suicide is not determined by social structure or suicidal action alone, but is a product of interplay between the two.

Below, we will take a further look at the mechanisms behind the differences in the time–space distribution of farmers' suicide. Questions to be discussed include: Why do young women in tight-knit societies have a higher rate of suicide, why is the suicide rate among middle-aged people in loose-knit societies more noticeable, and why is it old people have a higher rate of suicide in individualistic societies? Why has the suicide rate among young women in tight-knit societies decreased significantly while that among old people in individualistic societies increased prominently, and why, in loose-knit societies, has the suicide rate among young women significantly dropped while that among old people risen quite obviously?

So far as the reality of China is concerned, the rural areas of tight-knit societies with a high degree of kinship bonds and

of regulatory control have preserved patriarchy quite well, and derived from it is a patriarchal clan system which, though greatly impacted in the days of the people's communes, was restored to varied degrees after the reform and opening up started in the country. In such a social structure, fathers (i.e. the parental generation) in intergenerational relationships generally still have much authority, and so are husbands in conjugal relations; by comparison, young women have a fairly low status. Women born in the 1960s and 1970s were, by the 1980s and 1990s, either reached the age of marriage or were just married, and their rights ideas, long under the influence of discourse on the emancipation of women, were double unleashed upon the collapse of the old system; they (including their young male counterparts) were ideologically much more liberated than their parents who were born in the 1930s, 1940s, or the early years of the 1950s. But problems came with it. In intergenerational conflicts, what fathers invoked was a patriarchal discourse bestowed upon them by the original social structure, while it was a liberation discourse necessary for a modern social structure that their children turned to. Similarly, in spousal conflicts, husbands resorted to a discourse from the original social structure regarding a husband's authority over his wife, but wives turned to a gender equality discourse. The transformation of the entire social structure was not completed yet. To the contrary, after the disintegration of the old system, the original system it had replaced was even briefly restored (a typical example was the clan revival in the 1980s and 1990s). Therefore, tension derived from the structure could not be overcome by relying on ideas. And so there emerged a situation in which the structural transformation lagged behind the liberation of ideas. Under this tension, young women would rather choose to commit suicide to escape the repressive structure, and this was the root cause of the tide of suicide among young women which took place in the 1980s and 1990s.

With this mechanism understood, it will be easy for us to have a better understanding of the time–space differences and changes in suicide in various types of society.

In rural tight-knit societies with a high degree of kinship bonds and of regulatory control, the transformation of their structure lagged far behind the liberation of ideas, with the entire social structure and cultural norms working to help protect fathers and males—this is also why suicide was particularly endemic among young women. In rural loose-knit societies where the pace of structural transformation was slightly faster, rates of suicide among young women still remained quite high but much lower than in rural tight-knit societies. Similarly, in rural individualistic societies where structural transformation was basically completed, young women had the lowest suicide rates of these three types of society.

From the standpoint of change, with the old system disintegrated since the 1980s, the new market system made inroads into the rural parts of the country, continuing to change farmers' notions and fundamentally changing the rural social structures. This was manifested as follows: the degree of kinship bonds and of regulatory control became increasingly low, especially in tight-knit societies; loose-knit societies moved from a moderate to a lower degree of kinship bonds and regulatory control, while individualistic societies continued to deepen; with structural transformation and the liberation of ideas being increasingly in agreement, there were dropping rates of suicide among young women. The decline in the suicide rate among rural young women after 2000 was in essence closely linked with this.

But new problems arose once again. The strong in the original structures became the weak in the new structures, the most notable example being old people. A striking question was what would incapacitated old people live on?

In the old social structure, there was a cultural system that could guarantee old people's access to means of

subsistence from their children, and in the days of the people's communes when the old structure was temporarily suppressed, the village and commune collectives carried out this function. But in the new structure, those collectives were largely abolished, and the state's old-age care measures, except for the Five-Guarantee Scheme which covered a small portion of the old population, were long unavailable. It was already impossible in fact for old people to go back to the former structural system in which they could rely on the original patriarchal system for survival, and the only thing that could be done was let them face the market directly. But what could an incapacitated old person have to trade on the market for what they needed to live? They seemed to only have two ways out: to die of starvation or illness, or to commit suicide when they were still able to. In fact, in rural individualistic societies, some old people chose the first option, the misery of which encouraged more old people to choose the second option. Consequently, a tide of suicide among old people emerged quite early and still continues in rural individualistic societies, while in rural tight-knit societies and loose-knit societies, such a tide is rising or accelerating, attending to their transformation in the direction of individualistic societies. It could be said that the current phenomenon of suicide among middle-aged people in loose-knit societies, so striking as to make suicide in the entire society appear discrete in distribution, will not last too long. This is also demonstrated by a growing rate of suicide among old people in rural tight-knit societies.

From a theoretical standpoint, I think that both the manifestation of and the change in the above-described phenomena of suicide among farmers in the three main types of society are a result of mutual construction and co-variation of structure and action.

First, there is macro mutual construction between the state and particular types of society, manifested in the process of state power making inroads into or transforming

various types of society. This process suggests that, between the state and a specific type of society is not what is often academically referred to as an either-or framework, but a process of interaction and mutual construction. In other words, the state produces effects on society which simultaneously responds with its own micro-structural characters to the state, and subsequently between both is formed a certain mode of mutual construction. For a rural tight-knit society with a high level of kinship bonds and regulatory control, the entry of state power temporarily suppresses patriarchal and other traditional factors, but this society's response to state power is not quite passive owing to its intrinsic traditional structure, and when state power exits for the moment, the original structural factors like kinship bonds and regulatory control gain strength once again or are restored to varied degrees, making this society regress to its former more traditional structure. Nevertheless, state power doesn't have no influences on this type of social structure after all. Ideologically, as a matter of fact, it permeates deeply into and influences each individual in causing ideological changes to society as a whole. The most typical example is the entry of the liberation discourse described above, which greatly influenced actions in everyday life of young women—including suicidal actions. But this idea of liberation actually conflicted with the lagging structural transformation, and the resulting mode of mutual construction was finally manifested in the wave of suicides in particular periods among women in rural tight-knit societies.

Second, there is mutual construction between the market as a whole and particular types of society. In the process of mutual construction between state power and society, united rural societies saw a wave of suicide among young women, but individualistic societies, thanks to a low level of kinship bonds and regulatory control, were more readily transformed by state power. This is to say, a set of ideas, for example on liberation, make inroads into rural individualistic

societies in a mutually enhancing way that is fit for the structure of the societies. Therefore, the phenomena of suicide among women were far less noticeable than in rural tight-knit societies. The problem was that the market (including market entities, market ideas or rules) which emerged and gradually grew in the 1980s also made inroads into individualistic societies. If we say that tight-knit societies temporarily resisted the market owing to their lagging structural transformation, individualistic societies also manifested a process of interaction between their particular social structure and the market, from which was thus derived a unique mode of mutual construction. As older people are more vulnerable to the market, this mode of mutual construction was gradually manifested in a suicide epidemic among old people in this type of society. As the situations in loose-knit societies are somewhere between the tight-knit societies and individualistic societies described above, a moderate degree of kinship bonds and regulatory control interact with state power and the market to give rise to a moderate pattern of suicidal action–that is the age structure for suicide victims appears discrete. It is just this discrete distribution that makes loose-knit societies stand out among the three main types of society in terms of suicide of middle-aged persons. The change in phenomena of suicide among farmers in the three main types of society is also a result of interactions between the state and the market on the one hand and particular types of society on the other. Despite the changes, there is a trend toward convergence. In brief, the structural transformation in rural tight-knit societies, though lagging behind, will be complete over time, matching the entry of state power and the market, a change that makes the mode of mutual construction between them similar more and more to that in rural individualistic societies; the change in loose-knit societies is somewhere between the above-mentioned two types of society, and is faster in the spectrum of change than tight-knit societies,

thus more rapidly approaching the characteristic distribution of suicide in rural individualistic societies.

We know that individuals and society, or action and structure, have always been primary subjects in history of sociology. Exactly what their forms of expression in China look like is apparently what we should pay attention to in making abstract theoretical considerations. Therefore, in view of the academic impact that the empirical reality of farmers' suicide per se has on me, not only need I make sense of the basic situations of and empirical mechanisms for farmers' suicide, I also need to take it as the point of departure for discussions about a comparatively abstract theoretical problem. In fact, even in Western history of sociology, suicide has always remained an ideal field of research on action and structure. This is because from the perspective of academic traditions, the suicide studies following Durkheim's positivist approach, differ from those following Weber's humanistic approach. The former consistently stress the effects of social structure on suicide rates while the latter focus on the social meanings built by individual actors into suicidal actions. The relationship between both is typical of a binary opposition in Western social sciences, with scholars explaining suicide on the basis of either structure or action.

However, in view of what we have discovered in this book, it is not proper to interpret suicide from the perspective of suicidal actions or society alone. As a matter of fact, patterns of suicidal actions differ from society to society; conversely, the concentration of different types of suicidal action shapes or gives rise to different types of social structure. If we try to understand suicide simply from the perspective of actions, it is apparently impossible for us to explain different types of society associated with such actions or varying age structures of suicide victims in these societies, for example, an overwhelmingly high proportion of young women among victims in tight-knit societies, old

people in individualistic societies, and middle-aged people in loose-knit societies. This alone justifies the necessity of incorporating the impact of differences in social structure into our discussion of suicidal actions. Therefore, Douglas' theory cannot be applied indiscriminately to the empirical reality of China.

Conversely, when we observe from the angle of action, we will find its effect on social structure. Take suicide among women in a tight-knit society for example. Despite a social structure where both kinship bonds and regulatory control are strong, the first case or the earliest few cases of vengeful suicide certainly occurred unexpectedly, but the effect of the actions would prompt potential female victims in similar situations to take the same suicidal action, thus involving social structural forces in specific incidents in the aftermath of suicide. *Darenming* a revengeful practice associated with suicide in tight-knit societies, suggests that suicidal actions are contagious. In this sense, Durkheim's (1996) argument against the social consequences of imitation of suicides or the effect of imitation on suicide rates is improper.

Empirical data on suicide in China points to the imitation effect of suicide in particular social structures, which in return solidifies the structures. Similarly, in an individualistic society, the imitation and the contagion of suicide among old people, and the resulting superimposition of effects of numerous similar suicidal actions, are bound to solidify all the more the force of social structure detrimental to the survival of old people. Certainly, the broader state and market force outside of society impacts social structure and social action and causes change thereto.

In tight-knit societies, therefore, the suicide-related phenomenon of *darenming* became possible in the early years owing to approvals from traditional culture, giving rising to the contagion of the corresponding type of suicide and shaping suicide characteristics that match the particular

type of society. However, when state power, modern law for example, intervenes, this situation can be gradually changed. Originally, *darenming* could be deemed a common mass event in local cultures, but upon the introduction of modern law, such fights between clans became criminal cases. In other words, suicide which originally was taken as homicide in the folk law system would be construed as suicide under the state law. Conversely, if such suicide was recognized as homicide, then the *darenming* action would be construed and recognized as homicide under the state law, and the intervention from this opposite force would change the particulars of suicidal actions. This also explains why *darenming* gradually faded into obscurity. In other words, when similar vengeful suicidal actions can no longer achieve their intended goals, due to the presence of state law, such actions would become much less contagious and gradually disappear, which would, in a sense, expedite disintegration of the social structure which these actions were intended to regulate and strengthen, thus leading to the weakening of kinship bonds and regulatory control–and this is the cause for a transition towards an individualistic society. We will find, in effect, that when such a social structure loosens and state power's indirect intervention in suicide causes the change of suicidal actions, alongside the infiltration of the external force of the market, suicide of despair among old people will become the main type of suicide in this type of society, and the contagious quality of suicide will encourage old people in similar situations to take similar actions, thus further weakening the social structure of an individualistic society and accelerating social disorganization.

In extreme circumstances, with social disorganization and disunity intensified, and the splitting or dispersing process accelerated, there will be a surge in suicide of despair and egoistic suicide. This shows the increasing tendency for suicide to become a modern malady in rural China.

# Afterword

The English edition of my book *A Study of Suicide in Rural China* is finally about to be published. Since Springer Publishing planned to publish this book in 2015, more than six years have passed, during which time I encountered various difficulties. The length of time happens to be exactly the same as that I spent writing the Chinese edition of the book, which might be a “destiny”.

The English edition is based on a heavily abridged version of the original Chinese text. The general principle of the revision is to make the book more concise. The changes include deleting a considerable amount of theoretical content while keeping the central theoretical framework intact so as to make the book easier to understand for general readers; substantially cutting down descriptions of supporting diagrams without jeopardizing the logic of the arguments; and in terms of the subjects of the fieldwork, shifting the emphasis from a comparison of different types and regions to a village-to-type account, thus cutting short the sections on regional differences.

Consequently, the English edition omitted Chapter 5 “Farmer Suicide by Region” of the Chinese edition while keeping the first four chapters (“Introduction”, “Farmer Suicide in Tight-knit Societies”, “Farmer Suicide in Loose-knit Societies” and “Farmer Suicide in Individualistic Societies”). Chapter 6 “Epilogue” in the Chinese edition became Chapter 5 “Conclusion” in the English edition.

In terms of revisions made to sections, Chapter One “Introduction” of the English edition cut down on Section One “Suicide Research in China” of the Chinese edition, reduced the paragraphs on psychology and psychiatry in Section Two “Classic Theory” to focus more on classic sociological studies of suicide, and curtailed the discussions on different research approaches in Section Three “Research Method” in order to highlight the one adopted in this book. For the following three chapters, Section Two “Suicide by Gender and Age” of each of these chapters in the Chinese edition was reduced and incorporated into the “Overview” section in the beginning; Section 4 “Suicide by Year” was changed to Section 3 “Changes in Farmer Suicide in a Tight-knit Society”, “Changes in Farmer Suicide in a Loose-knit Society”, and “Changes in Farmer Suicide in an Individualistic Society”, respectively; Section 5 “Suicide Mechanism” became “Mechanism for Farmer Suicide in a Tight-knit Society”, “Mechanism for Farmer Suicide in a Loose-knit Society”, and “Mechanism for Farmer Suicide in an Individualistic Society”, accordingly.

After the drastic revisions described above, the English edition, though about half the length of the Chinese edition, is more readable while maintaining academic rigor. By making the revisions, I intended the English

edition to be suitable for both professional readers and general readers. Interested Chinese readers and foreign readers proficient in Chinese may also read the Chinese edition of the book published in August 2014.

It is readers, first and foremost, who inspired me to make the revisions. I would like to say thank-you to my readers who posted their comments on the Douban.com Reader Group and the websites of online bookstores, and to the book reviewers from the press, self-media accounts, and online media. While the majority of their comments are positive, which is a great encouragement for me, I equally value the criticisms of my book, a considerable part of which has been incorporated into my revisions.

I have received great support from the Central China School of Rural Studies—of which I am a member—in the publication of the English edition. I am particularly grateful to my mentor Prof. He Xuefeng who has spared no effort to help me, whether in my research or in funding the publication of my works. I thank all my colleagues in the team for their persistent support.

I am also deeply indebted to my former doctoral advisor Prof. Zheng Hangsheng, who passed away six years ago, and who had always been a great inspiration to me. I cherish the memory of him profoundly.

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I give my special thanks to the translators, who I have never met, for their diligence and hard work in the time-consuming translation of the Chinese manuscript.

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Liu Yanwu

Luojia Hills, December 10, 2021

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